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Teachers could have guns at school under state bill, Lancaster senators voice support



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Pennsylvania lawmakers this week took a step toward allowing teachers and other school employees to carry guns on school grounds despite a promised veto from Gov. Tom Wolf and opposition from some school officials.

The “[school safety](#)” bill — [Senate Bill 383](#) — would give school boards the authority to establish policies for licensed and trained employees to carry firearms on school property.

Supporters say the measure aims to give local authorities another way to combat acts of violence in schools.

Detractors argue guns in the hands of teachers and other less-experienced gun users could make for more dangerous teaching environments.

“Bad guys keep finding a way to get into our schools and create these tragedies,” said Sen. Scott Martin, a Martic Township Republican who co-sponsored the bill. “These folks (armed school employees) would be able to defend themselves or end the threat before it goes rampant throughout the entire building.”

Not worth the risk

Sen. Don White, a Republican from Indiana County who sponsored the bill, said in a statement it would give “trained school personnel the opportunity to serve as first responders” when time is of the essence during acts of school violence.

But in the eyes of Mike Leichliter, superintendent for Penn Manor School District, going through the process to train teachers as first responders is not worth the energy or the risk.

Leichliter, who is a gun owner and the son of a retired police officer, said the training required would be both costly and time-consuming. And even if teachers went through such training, they would not be as equally prepared as a police officer in an emergency.

“I’d be more concerned about an intruder or someone else overpowering the person and taking the firearm because they don’t have the same training as a police officer,” said Leichliter, who added that Penn Manor High School has a full-time armed school resource officer.

Bill advances

Martin said he would “absolutely” be confident in the ability for school employees to be trained appropriately.

“Just because they’re not a police officer or whatnot does not mean they don’t know how to handle a weapon responsibly,” Martin said.

Sen. Ryan Aument, a Landisville Republican, said he would have confidence in the ability of school boards to design and institute specific plans based on their districts. He noted that while not every school would want firearms on its grounds, some rural ones may find it necessary in places where police response times are slower.

Aument was among the Senate Education Committee members who voted in favor of the bill 9-3 on Wednesday. The vote was the first time the bill passed committee after it stalled in two previous attempts in recent years.

The bill now heads to the state Senate.

Veto awaits

Still, even if the bill gets through the Legislature this session, it will be met by a veto from Wolf, the Democratic governor's spokesman J.J. Abbott. said

"School personnel shouldn't be told that the only help they will get from Harrisburg to make schools safer is the option to carry a loaded gun around their students," Abbott said in a statement.

"Harrisburg can help schools be safer by giving them adequate funding so schools can hire trained security professionals like school resource or police officers should school professionals feel they need it, and counselors and support staff for students. Gov. Wolf would also support increasing funding for the Department of Education's Safe Schools Initiative."

Groups such as the Pennsylvania State Education Association also oppose the bill, calling it "misguided" and dangerous.

"This legislation would create more problems for first responders arriving at the scene of an armed confrontation, making it more difficult to immediately distinguish a perpetrator from a school employee," PSEA President Jerry Oleksiak said in a statement.

Other school districts in Lancaster County could not be immediately reached for this story or said they needed more information on the bill before commenting.

Nationally, there have been more than 200 school shootings since 2013, [according to Everytown For Gun Safety](#), a group that tracks acts of gun violence.

[SB 383](#) by [LancasterOnline](#) on Scribd