

## Education Week

### Arming Teachers Will Make Schools More Dangerous

(Opinion)



—Getty

**By Chuck Cascio**

August 29, 2018

I've been retired for quite a few years now, but after 27 years as a middle and high school teacher, I have vivid memories—almost all extremely positive—of that workplace called "school."

And from my experience in the classroom, I know that it would be wrong to arm faculty members with guns. The dangers inherent in this proposal, advanced most recently by Secretary of Education **Betsy DeVos, who reportedly is considering allowing school districts to use federal funds to purchase firearms**, far outweigh any potential benefits.

Proponents of arming teachers seem to want to believe that the next time a shooter shows up to mow down our children, a teacher will whip out his or her rifle and shoot everyone to safety. Following are some realities that show what a misconception that is.

#### **Fatal Mistakes**

Over the years, I, along with many other faculty members, occasionally had to break up fights between students in the hallways. These fights always attracted an emotional crowd. Teachers would hear the noise, emerge from our classrooms, move through the gathering, and jump into the middle of two, or more, brawling students.

We would separate them, talk as calmly to the combatants as possible, wait for help, and then walk the fighters to the principal's office. The gathering of onlookers would usually disperse peacefully as teachers urged them to "move along now."

Sometimes the fights were brutal; other times, they were less intense. But there was always the potential for danger. After all, we were dealing with teenagers and the hormonal and emotional surges built into those years.

Now, add a faculty member with access to a gun or a rifle into those scenes. If that faculty member is in the classroom and hears ominous screams and thumps of students in the corridor, how does the teacher know for sure what is going on? In an instant, how does the faculty member know the commotion is a fight between students, rather than the presence of someone about to become a shooter?

Does the teacher proactively grab the weapon and race out of the classroom and into a hallway filled with emotionally charged youths? If it turns out to be a fight, does the faculty member use the weapon to help stop it?

A teacher's gun shouldn't become the accepted means of controlling students' physical conflicts. We underestimate the fear that the simple sight of a teacher displaying a weapon might cause in kids' minds.

Even if teachers don't make a conscious decision to discharge their weapons, there is still potential for danger. Guns can discharge accidentally. In a fit of rage or panic, one of the fighters or one of the student onlookers in the crowd could reach for the weapon. A student could succeed in wrestling the weapon from the teacher. In these situations, how should the teacher react? What would be the consequences?

### **Misplaced Priorities**

If there is an active shooter in the school, having a gun is likely to leave a teacher less able to protect his students, not more. Here is the reality teachers would face in that situation:

A teacher hears the signal for an "active shooter." In the chaos that ensues, the teacher must first ensure that the panicked students follow whatever safety protocol has been established. Then, if the teacher is one of the faculty members who has supposedly been trained in how to use a gun or rifle, that teacher would need to unlock whatever structure is storing the weapon, load it, leave his or her students alone, and wander into the unknown.

In this situation, teachers are focused on reaching and using their weapons—not on making sure students are safe in a secure location.

Once they're in the halls with weapon in hand, how are teachers supposed to identify, without failure, the shooter—as opposed to some frantic student running around the halls? Or another teacher speeding around a corner to try to help someone? Or a custodian who has slammed a closet door while attempting to go into hiding? The potential for accidental injury or death at the hands of an armed teacher increases in this scenario, and it could very well end in tragedy.

### **Poisoning the School Environment**

There is another aspect of this "arm the teacher" movement that is extremely disturbing.

Schools are institutions of learning. These are places meant to contribute to thoughtfulness, trial and error, youthful aspirations. These are places where the youth of our nation form their friendships, test their ideals, immerse themselves in community. Schools should not be turned into places where every look, every comment, every sound, every movement raises these questions in students' minds:

*Is that the teacher with the gun?*

*If I laugh too loudly with my friends, will our laughter be mistaken for crying or calling for help resulting in a nervous teacher appearing with a rifle?*

*Is the only way to keep myself safe in life to arm myself?*

Arming teachers would be a lesson in disaster, destined to bring about more tragedies and to leave our already damaged schools, educators, and children with more scars.

*Chuck Cascio was a teacher of English and journalism for 27 years in Fairfax County, Va. He has contributed to the Washington Post and other publications. Cascio has also served as the vice president of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards for six years and as a vice president at Educational Testing Service for 10 years. Now a consultant and freelance writer, his latest work is the novel **The Fire Escape Belongs in Brooklyn**.*