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The Security Theater of Hardening Schools

BY CHRISTOPHER GEARING ON MARCH 1, 2023 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



The Republican-controlled Texas state legislature has long taken a pro-gun approach to school safety. Beginning in at least 2009, after Major Nidal Hasan gunned down 13 people and injured over 30 others in the deadliest terror attack on a U.S. Army Base, a **private security contractor developed** (<http://texasschoolguardianprogram.com/>) what is called the “Guardian Program” to help rural areas defend themselves before police officers arrive at the scene of an active shooting. In 2013 (<https://www.tcole.texas.gov/content/school-marshals#:~:text=The%2085th%20legislature%20passed%20HB,the%20School%20Board%2FGoverning%20Body.>), the Texas Legislature codified two versions of this program, known as the School Marshal Program and Guardians Program, both allowed certain licensed individuals to carry weapons on school campuses after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary massacre.

Since the Marshal Program was established, there have been several other major school shootings — most notably and recently, the 2022 massacre at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas. In the wake of this shooting, it seems school safety has once again become a priority issue as the 88th legislative session kicks off. Many have raised concerns over the way the Uvalde school police department responded to the shooting as well as the overall state response. For example, the **Texas House’s Investigative Report** (https://house.texas.gov/_media/pdf/committees/reports/87interim/Robb-Elementary-Investigative-Committee-Report.pdf) on the Uvalde Shooting found “systemic failures and egregiously poor decision-making.” This raised questions about the efficacy and need for further militarization of our schools, since clearly the school P.D. **did nothing to deter** (<https://www.texastribune.org/2022/05/26/texas-uvalde-shooting-harden-schools/>) or stop the shooter before he killed 21 children and teachers that day. In fact, an **18-year national study** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/04/16/study-theres-no-evidence-that-hardening-schools-make-kids-safer-gun-violence-actually-works/>) found that ‘hardening’ schools against shootings did not reduce mass shooting incidents. Rather, the study finds that the “hardening of schools with visible security measures is an attempt to alleviate parental and student fears regarding school safety and to make the community aware that schools are doing something.” But overwhelming evidence has not stopped the security theater of the Texas Legislature in regard to educational institutions.

Predictably, several Republicans have **argued** (<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/05/ted-cruz-one-door-uvalde-texas-school-shooting>) that can be summarized as such: “there aren’t enough good guys with guns” in schools to stop school shootings and kill the attacker(s). While current Texas law gives school districts control over whether or not they allow their staff to participate in the Marshals Program, Sen. Hall’s **SB 354** (<https://tlis/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=88R&Bill=SB354>) would expand existing “Campus Carry” legislation from university and college campuses to K-12. Essentially, the bill eliminates schools as “gun-free zones” and would change their perception from so-called “**magnets** (<https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/texas-bill-would-expand-campus-carry-for-guns-to-public-schools-15643714>)” for violence,

according to Sen. Hall. To be clear, if voted into law, this bill would allow anyone with a license to carry a concealed handgun to do so on school grounds, leaving schools powerless to prohibit such activity.

Nonetheless, the fact that trained police officers failed to stop the Robb Elementary shooting has not stopped school districts from adopting school police departments, the Marshals Program, or the Guardians program. As many as **50 new ISDs** (<https://thetexan.news/school-districts-embrace-guardian-program-to-arm-employees-for-school-safety/>) have moved forward with adopting the Guardians program in the months after the Uvalde shooting. One such district, Keller ISD in Dallas, approved the Guardians program for school employees, arguing that the **“first few minutes”** (<https://communityimpact.com/dallas-fort-worth/keller-roanoke-northeast-fort-worth/education/2022/12/13/keller-isd-approves-guardian-program-allowing-teachers-staff-to-carry-guns-on-campus/>) of a shooting are crucial to saving lives. It's worth pointing out that Keller ISD already spends **\$1.7 million** (<https://communityimpact.com/dallas-fort-worth/keller-roanoke-northeast-fort-worth/education/2022/12/13/keller-isd-approves-guardian-program-allowing-teachers-staff-to-carry-guns-on-campus/>) on 16 School Resource Officers (SRO), who are licensed peace officers. At a **minimum** (<https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/news-and-multimedia/correspondence/taa-letters/school-based-law-enforcement>), peace officers must complete active shooter **ALERT training Level 1** (https://alerrt.org/course_types/LevelOne), which takes 16 hours, as well as an additional 20 hours of classroom training to be certified to work in a school setting as an SRO. By contrast, the Guardian Program only requires **16 hours** (<https://schoolsontarget.com/guardian.html#:~:text=This%20class%20requires%20that%20participants,handgun%20qualification%20and%20written%20test.&text=The%20Texas%20School%20Guardian%20Program,only%20provider%20of%20the%20program.>) of combined classroom and shooting training. The Marshal Program, however, surpasses them both and takes about **80 hours** (<https://www.tcole.texas.gov/content/school-marshals>) of combined training.

The vast majority of teachers, administrators, and community leaders oppose carrying weapons on school property, though. In a survey conducted following the Robb Elementary massacre by the Texas American Federation of Teachers (Texas AFT), 77% of respondents **rejected** (<https://www.texasaft.org/releases/teachers-union-survey-shows-school-employees-overwhelmingly-77-do-not-want-to-be-armed/>) the idea of arming teachers. Opponents of arming teachers worry that the training accompanying these types of programs cannot adequately prepare teachers to act in a crisis. Texas AFT's president explains, “teachers can't be expected to become highly-trained law enforcement officers and use guns in a crisis without endangering students or themselves.” Law enforcement advocates have similar concerns.

Furthermore, in the wake of the Parkland shooting in 2018, several groups began to speak out as many schools began arming their educators. For example, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) **opposes arming teachers** (<https://www.nasro.org/news/2018/02/22/news-releases/nasro-opposes-arming->

teachers) because law enforcement officers who respond to an incident at a school could mistake them for the assailant or any other armed person who is not in a uniform. This is exacerbated by the fact that in Texas, the identities of Marshals and Guardians are confidential and are not disclosed to local law enforcement officers. NASRO also raises concerns about the psychological impact on untrained teachers of carrying a gun and potentially having to take a student's life in an active-shooter situation. Perhaps the most important thing to remember: *teachers are not in schools to kill people*. They are there to educate the youth. Another **study** (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1267255.pdf>) highlighted the problematic assumption that teachers can seamlessly switch from educator to expert marksman at the drop of a hat. While law enforcement with hundreds of hours of training regularly have accuracy rates in active shooter situations between 18-43%, we cannot expect those educators with far less training to be lethal crime-stopping machines as well.

In fact, the mere presence of firearms in schools has already led to incidents where students gain access to weapons, die or cause serious harm to others, and raise the question of who is liable. Everytown USA **outlines** (<https://everytownresearch.org/report/arming-teachers-introduces-new-risks-into-schools/>) cases where guns have been left in bathrooms, locker rooms, at sporting events, and even the situation where a gun fell out of possession when a teacher did a backflip. Other **reports** (<https://apnews.com/article/ar-state-wire-ia-state-wire-wa-state-wire-id-state-wire-parkland-florida-school-shooting-2cfba6696074f0913e09e2ed5adcc593>) show dozens of cases of accidental shootings, both by teachers/employees and highly-trained law enforcement officers. It simply is **not safe to have guns around children** (<https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/m13-1301>) by any metric.

So, why continue the pointless spending aimed at getting automatic weapons in schools? The Texas legislature is planning on allocating **\$600 million to school safety measures** (<https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/02/texas-legislature-public-education/>), most going to further “hardening” policies previously enacted in 2019. But, as researchers have pointed out, these policies and dollars spent serve as nothing more than a means to reduce fear among the population while serving the political needs of state leaders. This display of security theater is designed to make it look like the government is acting to prevent further tragedies, rather than actually addressing the root causes of shootings — access to guns and mental health problems. Countless **studies** (<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2022/gun-violence-prevention-experts-react-to-texas-school-shooting>) have concluded that the best way to address gun violence in schools is to restrict access to weapons in the first place. Joshua Horowitz, the co-director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, **said** (<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2022/gun-violence-prevention-experts-react-to-texas-school-shooting>) “in most states the ability to purchase these deadly weapons is less restricted than the ability to purchase beer.” This in spite of the 18-20 age group being most likely to commit gun violence. But that’s a discussion worthy of its own article.

The Security Theater in Texas and across the nation is nothing new. Politicians around the world have been engaging in such political antics since as far back as we document laws. However, in Texas, these theatrics have and will continue to have negative effects on educators and students, the very people they claim to want to protect most. And to those who continue to say that arming teachers is an effective policy solution? As C.J. Cregg in *The West Wing* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKdSGSZfbnA>) put it, “If anyone thinks those [gun] crimes could have been prevented if the victims themselves had been carrying guns, I’d only remind you that the President of the United States was shot last night while surrounded by the best trained armed guards in the history of the world.”



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My name is Christopher Gearing, and I'm a Government major, member of the Liberal Arts Honors cohort, and Business & Public Policy minor, member of the class of 2024. I'm passionate about politics, Texas government, and law. **View all posts by Christopher Gearing** (<https://thetexasorator.com/author/christophergearing/>)

