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Arming Teachers: Would This Really Protect Our Children?

In October 2006, Wisconsin State Representative Frank Lasee (R-WI) announced his plans to introduce legislation that would allow teachers and school administrators to carry concealed firearms, in spite of a federal law banning guns from school property. Lasee "... stressed that the measure would hinge on school staff members getting strict training on the use of weapons" (Associated Press, 2006c). Given my extensive training in the law enforcement field, I do not advocate teachers carrying guns into their classrooms. I believe that individual teachers may be capable of learning to be good shots in a stress situation. However, it is unlikely that most would spend the time required practicing their firearm skills to become confident during an actual school shooting. Unless these teachers practice their shooting skills constantly, there would be a high risk that when a shooting situation actually occurs they would miss the assailant. This leaves great potential for a bullet to strike a student or another innocent bystander. Such teachers could be imprisoned for manslaughter for recklessly endangering others during school crises.

Experienced law enforcement officers have typically fired tens of thousands of rounds practicing for the time when they would need to utilize those skills in order to save themselves or someone else during a lethal situation. Those of us in law enforcement have made a commitment to train relentlessly and, if we have to, die in order to protect others. We take this commitment very seriously and, before you make the decision to put a gun in the hands of a school teacher, so should you. Those of us who have chosen the law enforcement field can answer all of the following questions with absolute confidence. I encourage any legislator or educator contemplating the possibility of arming teachers to consider the following:

- Is the school prepared to assume the liability that accompanies the lethal threat of carrying and/or using weapons? Is the school district prepared to dramatically increase their liability insurance premium to cover all of the legal ramifications involved with allowing staff members to carry firearms?
- How much time will each teacher be given each year to spend on a firing range to practice shooting skills? Will such time be paid?
- Will their training include exposing these educators to a great amount of stress, in order to simulate a real-life shooting situation (such as the training police officers go through)?
- Will the firearm they carry be on their person during the school day? If so, will staff members be given extensive defensive tactics training so that they can retain their firearm if a student or adult tries to disarm them?
- Will staff members who carry a firearm be in excellent physical shape and required to stay that way given the fact that they may need to fight someone in order to retain their gun?
- The fact that the school district allows staff members to carry firearms in the school would be publicized. Will weapon-carrying staff members accept the risk of being

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intentionally targeted by a violent student or adult in order to neutralize the threat and/or obtain their weapon?

- If the firearms are not to be carried on the educators' person, where and how will they be secured so that the firearms do not fall into the wrong hands?
- If the firearms are locked up, how will staff members access them in time to be effective in an actual shooting situation?
- Will weapon-carrying staff members accept that they may be shot by responding law enforcement officers during a school shooting situation? (All the responding officers see is a person with a gun; if you are even close to matching the suspect's description there is a very high risk that they may shoot you!)
- Will school teachers be prepared to **kill** another person, a person who may be as young as 13-, 12-, 11-years old or even younger¹?
- Will staff members also be prepared for the possibility that they may miss their target (which has even occurred in police shootings) and wound or kill an innocent bystander or student?
- Will staff members be ready to face imprisonment for manslaughter (depending on their states' criminal statutes) if one of their bullets did strike an innocent person?
- Even if not criminally charged, would such staff members be prepared to possibly be civilly sued, both as a professional working for a school district and as an individual, exposing their personal assets?

Even if each of these questions could be answered affirmatively by school staff members, one must consider whether school safety statistics support the implementation of such extreme measures. Tragic school shootings notwithstanding, the US Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that, "Serious violent victimization rates were lower at school than away from school for each survey year from 1992 through 2004. During the same time the violent crime rate at school dropped by 54 percent ... " (as cited in NSSC, 2006, p. 2). Director of School Safety for the Milwaukee, WI Public Schools, Pete Pochowski, opposes Rep. Lasee's proposal to arm Wisconsin's educators. "Statistically, the safest place for a child to be is in school," he said. "We have problems in our schools, but not to the point where we need to arm our teachers and principals" (Associated Press, 2006c). I, and many respected and knowledgeable educators, trainers, and mental health professionals truly believe that the greatest preventative tool that we can implement in schools today in order to reduce school violence is the creation of a school environment that promotes respect among staff and students.

Allow me to offer a real life example of someone who prepared and trained with his firearm but the reality of the event stopped him from taking action. On November 20, 2005 a man by the name of James Maldonado entered the Tacoma Mall in Tacoma Washington during the holiday season and opened fire on anyone and everyone he could through the crowded Mall. A citizen

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by the name of Brendon "Dan" McKown carried a firearm every day to work in the Tacoma Mall in Tacoma Washington because he made money drops from his business where he was the manager. McKown also had his concealed weapons permit and we would later find out that he practiced frequently with his gun in case something like this should ever happen. In an interview with the News Tribune in Tacoma Washington published on November 29th, 2005 from his hospital bed, McKown told reporter M. Alexander Otto "he carried a gun and even trained for situations where he could keep innocent people from getting hurt. McKown said Monday that he briefly drew his gun on Tacoma Mall shooting suspect Dominick S. Maldonado, but he's not sure Maldonado saw it. He could have shot Maldonado, McKown said, but hesitated. "I'm looking at this guy," McKown said. "He's a kid. I would have had to shoot him in the head." McKown just wasn't ready for that. It's not easy to shoot someone in the head, McKown said. McKown also didn't want to get in the way of the police if they were handling the situation, and he knew he could get in trouble for brandishing a weapon in the mall. "I heard extremely powerful rifle shots. Boom! Boom! Boom! Very loud. People were diving for cover, running, screaming," he said. McKown knows guns, and knew what he heard was a high-caliber, military-style weapon. He even thought two people could be firing. He walked to the front of the store to see what was going on, and took a defensive posture, crouched to one side in the store's entrance. He had his gun out, but tucked it back into his belt, under his clothes, after thinking better of it. Meanwhile, Maldonado walked past the Kits store. "We had eye-to-eye contact the whole time," McKown said. He is unsure if Maldonado saw his weapon. McKown, standing, said to Maldonado, "I think you need to put that gun down, young man." McKown's hand was back near his gun. Maldonado swung his barrel over and opened fired from the hip. "Every one of his shots got some part of me," McKown said. McKown's legs locked up with the impact of the first rounds and he started to topple over. McKown said Maldonado followed his body as he fell, firing. The shooter was "expressionless, that was the strange thing. He was definitely cold," McKown said. As he felt the bullets enter his body, "I felt like an idiot," McKown said. "I carried a gun to protect my fellow man," but it hadn't worked out that way."

I feel badly for Mr. McKown and the suffering he has gone through and will continue to go through for the rest of his life as a result of a heartless act by Mr. Maldonado. My point in telling this story is that what you think you will do and what you train to do during a life or death situation where you may have to shoot someone can be two different things when it actually happens to you. You see television trains people that you need to give them a verbal warning before you shoot them, i.e., "Police, drop the weapon or I'll shoot." NOT TRUE. According to every law in every state in this country if someone is killing people you have the right to use equal or greater force to stop them. This citizen should have never given Maldonado a verbal warning of any kind as he was already shooting people. This citizen would have been well within his rights to immediately, and without warning, shoot Maldonado thereby stopping an Active Killer and either saving lives or saving others from possible long term injuries. Instead, he was shot, almost died and is currently still partially paralyzed as a result of his decision not to shoot. I only use this highly publicized mall shooting as an example of the difference between

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