



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 19, 2018

Published in the March 19, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 06

Unmaking Gun-free Killing Zones

From the print edition of The New American

As emotionally charged calls continue for stricter gun control in the aftermath of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, one common-sense alternative is turning into a clear and resonant call across the nation: Do away with the ill-advised “gun-free zones” around schools that have made them appealing targets for unhinged individuals, and instead train and arm teachers, staff, and other responsible adults for such contingencies.



While gun-control proponents argue that such a duty should be left to the police, the truth is that in any active-shooter situation, law-enforcement personnel almost always arrive on the scene after the attack is over. And where law-enforcement personnel are on the premises, they typically are not in the immediate vicinity of where the shooting occurs — an important consideration when seconds count.

Such was the case February 14 at Parkland’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. As 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz gunned down 17 students and staff, and wounded 15 more, Broward County Sheriff’s Deputy Scot Peterson, who was assigned to the school, was outside the building when the bullets started flying. And instead of rushing into the building, he sought “cover behind a concrete column,” said another officer who arrived on the scene.

“He never went in,” Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel acknowledged in a news conference, adding that surveillance video showed the armed-and-ready Peterson doing nothing as defenseless individuals inside the school were being killed by Cruz. “There are no words,” said Israel, who said that he was “devastated, sick to my stomach.” Sheriff Israel’s comments may have been a sincere reflection of his disappointment in the inaction of one of his employees, an employee who claimed he thought the shooting was coming from outside the building, or they may have been an effort at PR spin. After all, we subsequently learned that Peterson was just one of four sheriff’s deputies who waited outside the school during the shooting. The reality is that as a professional, the sheriff was certainly aware that law-enforcement officers are not required to put themselves in harm’s way in the line of duty. As explained by Steve Papenfuhs, a law-enforcement consultant who spent nearly 30 years as an officer with the San Jose, California, police department, police officers “have no obligation to protect any one individual unless a ‘special relationship’ exists” with an individual in danger. “Rather, an officer’s sworn duty is to the general public.”

By the time police from nearby Coral Springs arrived on the scene and entered the building, Cruz had slipped out with fleeing students. Instead of stopping Cruz in the midst of his killing spree, officials were faced with a mass-murder investigation.

With all of this in mind, it is apparent that school districts (and other public institutions) must make their own arrangements to help ensure that their communities’ children, as well as the staff who serve



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them, are safe from the types of deadly assaults that occurred in Parkland, Florida; Columbine, Colorado; Newtown, Connecticut; and elsewhere. But in order to do so, states and municipalities must do away with the ill-advised “gun-free zones” that have made schools such tempting targets to angry and armed criminals, who will always find a way to arm themselves for their deeds.

In the aftermath of the Parkland shooting, one of the first to publicly call for an end to gun-free zones around schools and for the training and arming of school staff was President Trump. In a listening session with state and local officials, the president said that teachers who felt comfortable with doing so should be trained and armed to protect their schools. “We have to harden our schools, not soften them up,” Trump declared, adding that he would support concealed-carry permits for teachers and “letting people know that there are people in the building with a gun.”

Speaking February 23 at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, Trump reiterated his call for arming teachers and staff, saying that “when we declare our schools to be gun-free zones, it just puts our students in far more danger.... Well-trained gun-adept teachers and coaches, and people that work in those buildings” should be able to carry concealed firearms. “It’s time to make our schools a much harder target for attackers.”

Writing in the February 5 edition of *USA Today*, Erich Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, agreed, noting that nearly every mass shooting in recent history in America has taken place in a so-called gun-free zone. “Killers continue targeting locations where guns are not allowed,” he said, adding that “repealing gun-free zones and lifting the restrictions that keep good people from carrying guns for self-defense — that will make a huge difference.”

Similarly, in a February 20 press release, the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association (CSPOA) endorsed the repeal of gun-free zones and the arming of school staff. “We support the training and arming of volunteer faculty at schools to carry concealed weapons,” the group said. “Once trained, these Americans, who have a vested interest in protecting schools and school children, can bring an end to a shooting spree with planned concerted action.”

Photo: AP Images

This article appears in the March 19, 2018, issue of The New American.

“We support the county sheriffs using their authority in training and deputizing faculty so they will be considered law enforcement and thus be qualified to carry concealed at the school,” the association said regarding areas where lawmakers fail to pass legislation repealing gun-free zones. “Citizens, especially parents, should demand their children be protected at school.”

Rick Dalton, the CSPOA’s legislative liaison, said that “as a retired police officer, firearms instructor, and retired school teacher, I know that more anti-gun legislation will not get the good guys with guns to the scene any faster. Our proposals will ensure that good guys with guns will already be on the scene and ready to stop intruders.”

One Florida law-enforcement official has already established a program to arm and train teachers and staff to defend their schools against attack. Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd launched the Sentinel program, through which teachers and staff volunteer for training that is more stringent than most police officers go through, and then are armed to protect their schools or college campuses. “When a crazed gunman arrives on campus with murder in his eyes, the deed is done within two to five minutes,”



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Judd said. However, he added, if adults already on the scene were prepared to resist such an attack, the results would likely be different than what happened in Parkland and elsewhere. “We had coaches that ran to stand in front of their students with no gun,” said Judd, recounting the heroics of Aaron Feis, a football coach and (unarmed) security guard at the Parkland high school, who died shielding students from Cruz’s attack. “Why not give them a fighting chance?”

In reality, there are other schools where such programs are already in place. In Texas, school districts in the communities of Harrold and Holliday “have been allowing members of their staffs to conceal carry handguns for years,” reported KFDX television news in Wichita Falls. In fact, the tiny community of Harrold was the first in the nation to arm its teachers, voting to do so in August 2008.

Faculty members are selected by the school board to be trained to carry a concealed firearm on school grounds, and only the superintendent and a few others know who those teachers are.

“They keep it on them at all times,” said Harrold Superintendent David Thweatt of the armed-and-ready faculty. “Folks who come in, if they are coming in to do something like just happened, then they don’t know where they are going to meet resistance and that is very critical to our plan.” He added that the strategy is “very simple: train the individuals and keep them here. Make sure people know that is exactly what we will do to answer an intruder.”

Thweatt recalled that when the plan was first implemented, some community members were not convinced that the strategy was right. “It was iffy as it was for the first several years,” he said. However, “that all changed in December 2012 after Sandy Hook. Suddenly it took on a whole new meaning.”

In nearby Holliday, Texas, superintendent Kevin Dyes said the response by parents to armed faculty in his community’s schools has been positive. “They have expressed that they feel better,” he said, knowing their children are safe from armed intruders. “If there has been any response to my knowledge the vast majority has been positive.”

The sentiments are similar in Claude, Texas, where a number of unidentified staff members carry concealed firearms. In fact, signs at the entrances of Claude schools warn potential intruders: “ATTENTION: Please be aware that the staff at Claude ISD is armed and may use whatever force necessary to protect our students.”

Parents with children who attend school in Claude say they feel good knowing that there are responsible teachers and staff who are armed and able to protect their students. “It makes me feel really, really safe that we have staff on hand if anything happened,” said one parent. “It brings me peace of mind.”

Claude ISD staffers who carry concealed on school grounds are required to practice shooting every month and train with local law enforcement.

“I don’t know who carries” said one Claude parent, “but I do know that if they’ve taken that dedication, they’re going to do everything in their power to keep our kids safe, even if they’re in harm’s way.”

In 2016, Colorado’s Hanover School District voted to allow teachers and staff to be armed on school grounds. The district, 30 miles southeast of Colorado Springs, has two schools and nearly 300 students and available law-enforcement officers must drive at least 20 minutes to answer a call in the district.

Also since 2016, Texas state law has allowed citizens with concealed-carry permits to be armed on the



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state's college and university campuses.

Since the February 12 Parkland, Florida, shooting, a number of lawmakers have stepped forward to push turning gun-free school zones into areas protected by armed teachers and staff. On February 20, Florida's Senate Judiciary Committee took up a bill that would allow for arming teachers in school districts throughout the state. The bill had actually been proposed by Republican State Senator Dennis Baxley before the February 14 attack, and following the attack it was taken up by fellow Republican Senator Greg Steube. "I don't feel gun-free zones protect anyone but criminals," said Steube, "and there is no evidence that says otherwise." The bill would give principals and superintendents throughout the state the authority to designate teachers and staff to carry firearms on school grounds.

In Colorado, the state legislature's Republican House Minority Leader Patrick Neville, who was a student at Columbine High School in 1999 when 12 students were killed in a shooting rampage by two senior students, introduced legislation that would allow teachers, staff, and other adults in the state's K-12 schools to be armed. Neville, who has introduced the bill each year since he was elected in 2014, said the measure "would allow every law-abiding citizen who holds a concealed carry permit, issued from their chief law-enforcement officer, the right to carry concealed in order to defend themselves, and most importantly our children, from the worst-case scenarios."

In January 2017, U.S. Representative Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) introduced the Safe Students Act (H.R. 34), which would repeal the Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990, a federal statute that makes it "unlawful for any individual knowingly to possess a firearm at a place that the individual knows, or has reasonable cause to believe, is a school zone." In 1995, the Supreme Court ruled the Gun-Free School Zones Act unconstitutional, prompting Congress to amend the bill in 1996.

"Gun-free school zones are ineffective," Massie said at the time he introduced the legislation. "They make people less safe by inviting criminals into target-rich, no-risk environments. Gun-free zones prevent law-abiding citizens from protecting themselves, and create vulnerable populations that are targeted by criminals."

As of February 19, Massie's bill, which has less than a half-dozen cosponsors (all Republican), was awaiting a hearing by the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security, and Investigations, chaired by Representative Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.).

In the wake of the latest mass school shooting, Massie reiterated the need to overturn the Gun-Free School Zones Act quickly. "Gun-free zones are invitations to deranged criminals," he said. "Why on earth would we have a federal law to advertise our schools as such? The 1990 law has done absolutely nothing to improve school safety, and should be repealed because it makes schools less safe."

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