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In Texas School, Teachers Carry Books and Guns

By [JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr.](#)

HARROLD, Tex. — Students in this tiny town of grain silos and ranch-style houses spent much of the first couple of days in school this week trying to guess which of their teachers were carrying pistols under their clothes.

“We made fun of them,” said Eric Howard, a 16-year-old high school junior. “Everybody knows everybody here. We will find out.”

The school board in this impoverished rural hamlet in North [Texas](#) has drawn national attention with its decision to let some teachers carry concealed weapons, a track no other school in the country has followed. The idea is to ward off a massacre along the lines of what happened at [Columbine High School](#) in Colorado in 1999.

“Our people just don’t want their children to be fish in a bowl,” said David Thweatt, the schools superintendent and driving force behind the policy. “Country people are take-care-of-yourself people. They are not under the illusion that the police are there to protect them.”

Even in Texas, with its tradition of lenient gun laws and frontier justice, the idea of teachers’ taking guns to class has rattled some people and sparked a fiery debate.

Gun-control advocates are wringing their hands, while pro-gun groups are gleeful. Leaders of the state’s major teachers unions have expressed stunned outrage, while the conservative Republican governor, [Rick Perry](#), has endorsed the idea.

In the center of the storm is Mr. Thweatt, a man who describes himself as “a contingency planner,” who believes Americans should be less afraid of protecting themselves and who thinks signs at schools saying “gun-free zone” make them targets for armed attacks. “That’s like saying sic ’em to a dog,” he said.

Mr. Thweatt maintains that having teachers carry guns is a rational response to a real threat. The county sheriff’s office is 17 miles away, he argues, and the district cannot afford to hire police officers, as urban schools in Dallas and Houston do.

The school board decided that teachers with concealed guns were a better form of security than armed peace officers, since an attacker would not know whom to shoot first, Mr. Thweatt said.

Teachers have received training from a private security consultant and will use special ammunition designed to prevent ricocheting, he added.

Harrold, about 180 miles northwest of Dallas, is a far cry from the giant districts in major Texas cities, where gang violence is the main concern and most schools have their own police forces. Barely 100 students of all ages attend classes here in two brick buildings built more than 60 years ago. There are two dozen teachers, a handful of buses and a football field bordered by crops.

Yet the town is not isolated in rustic peace, supporters of the plan point out. A four-lane highway runs through town, bringing with it a river of humanity, including criminals, they say. The police recently shut down a drug-producing laboratory in a ramshackle house near school property. Drifters sometimes sleep under the overpass.

"I'm not exactly paranoid," Mr. Thweatt said. "I like to consider myself prepared."

Some residents and parents, however, think Mr. Thweatt may be overstating the threat. Many say they rarely lock their doors, much less worry about random drifters with pistols running amok at the school. Longtime residents were hard-pressed to recall a single violent incident there.

Others worry that introducing guns into the classroom might create more problems than it solved. A teacher tussling with a student could lose control of a weapon, or a gun might go off by accident, they said.

"I don't think there is a place in the school whatsoever for a gun unless you have a police officer in there," said Bobby G. Brown, a farmer and former school board chairman whose two sons were educated at the school. "I don't care how much training they have."

His wife, Diane Brown, added: "There are too many things that could happen. They are not trained to make life-and-death-situation judgments."

Mr. Thweatt declined to say how many teachers were armed, or who they were, on the theory that it would tip off the bad guys. He also declined to identify the private consultant who provided teachers with about 40 hours of weapons training.

Most critics question whether teachers, even with extra training, are as qualified as police officers to take out an armed attacker.

"We are trained to teach and to educate," said Zeph Capo, the legislative director for the Houston Association of Teachers. "We are not trained to tame the Wild West."

Texas gun laws ban the weapons on school property. But the Legislature carved out an exception allowing school boards to permit people with concealed handgun licenses to carry their weapons. No local district had taken advantage of the exception until the Harrold school board acted.

Debbie Ratcliffe, a spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency, said the state's hands were tied. "We have really tried not to get involved in this," Ms. Ratcliffe said. "Frankly, it's a matter of local control."

Gun-control advocates say, however, that while the school district may be complying with state gun laws, it appears to be violating the education statute. That law says "security personnel" authorized to carry weapons on campuses must be "commissioned peace officers," who undergo police training.

"It seems to us not only an unwise policy but an illegal one," said Brian Siebel, a lawyer in Washington for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

The school district has countered that teachers are not "security personnel" and so do not need to become peace officers.

As a general rule, the seven school board members — a collection of farmers and oil workers led by an ambulance medic — have referred all questions from reporters to Mr. Thweatt. But one member, Coy Cato, gave a short interview. "In my opinion, it is the best way to protect our kids," Mr. Cato said. Asked if others in the community shared his view, he said that he had not taken a poll, but "I think so."

Still, several residents complained that the board made little or no effort to gather public opinion on the matter. Some said they did not hear about the plan until reporters started asking questions about it in early August.

Mr. Thweatt said the board discussed the proposal for nearly two years and considered several options — tranquilizer guns, beanbag guns, Tasers, Mace and armed security guards — but each was found lacking in some way. "We devil-advocated it to death," Mr. Thweatt said.

That discussion went unnoticed by many parents.

Traci McKay, a 34-year-old restaurant employee, sends three children to the school, yet said she had not heard about the pistol-carrying teachers until two weeks before the start of the semester. She was stunned.

"I should have been informed," Ms. McKay said. "If something happens, do we really want all these people shooting at each other?"

Ms. McKay said Mr. Thweatt had yet to explain why a town with such a low crime rate needed such measures. She is afraid, however, that her children might face repercussions if she takes up a petition against the idea.

"We are pretty much being told to deal with this or move," Ms. McKay said.

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