

OPINION: Arming teachers is a terrible idea

During my junior year of high school, two trench-coated outcasts murdered 13 people and injured 23 more at Columbine high school in Colorado. This being in the pre 9/11 days, violence of this sort—especially at a school—was unheard of. That news cycle felt like it lasted months, and there was a palpable sense that we had all lived through an era-shaping moment.

And in a way we had. Much like 9/11 marked the beginning of a period in which “terrorism” and “threat levels” became commonplace, Columbine ushered in an era where schools were seemingly in a sadistic lottery, each wondering if their building might be the next to metamorphose into a war zone. Since that April morning, school shootings have become so normal that depending on bodycount they often don't make it above the fold in newspapers.

Visit a news site and scroll down and you're liable to see “3 dead in school shooting in Anywhere, USA.” These events are no longer rare. They have become ordinary.

Following these tragedies, people take to social media to diagnose the problem and proffer solutions. Debates ensue until the fervor dies down, and we lapse into normalcy until the next school shooting. One of the solutions which has been floating around is to arm teachers.

The argument is if teachers have guns, a rogue would-be murderer would either think twice or be stopped cold by their Smith & Wesson-toting math teacher.

This is a profoundly dangerous idea for a number of reasons. To start, the introduction of a loaded gun into any altercation axiomatically makes it a life and death situation.

I've been teaching for thirteen years and have been called upon to break up fights and skirmishes many times. If a teacher has a gun on them, intervening in a fight is no longer an option. They could become incapacitated or overwhelmed. The gun could be removed from the holster or fired inadvertently. There are teachers in their 50s and 60s and there are high school students in their physical primes.

It wouldn't be difficult for someone with bad intentions to take the weapon by force. Some nefarious individual who otherwise wouldn't have had access to a gun could now see opportunity resting on their librarian's hip. There is also the risk that a teacher could accidentally shoot an innocent student or staff member in an attempt to bring down an attacker.

The possibilities for a mishap would rise exponentially with the increase of firearms. This "solution" also relies on the assumption that with training any person would be able to perform in a high-pressure situation. This is simply not the case. There are reports of highly trained police and military personnel who haven't fared well in firefights or situations. And those are people who chose those careers and have trained for years.

I'm to believe that a career teacher, after a few hours at the range, is going to be able to subdue a live shooter? (We're teachers; if we wanted to be police officers, we would've gone to the academy.) There's a reason we put such stock in the word "hero." Heroism and bravery and decisiveness are rare. Not everyone can thrive in nightmarish circumstances where lives hang in the balance. To put it another way: giving someone a rope doesn't make them a cowboy.

I don't know what the answer is to gun violence in schools. Perhaps it's going to take a variety of measures—greater gun control, expanded background checks, mental health awareness, greater security like metal detectors, surveillance, alarms,

and guards. But the answer is absolutely not flooding schools with dozens of loaded guns and hoping lifelong educators can transform into Dirty Harry at the first sign of trouble. In the battle of risk and reward, the risk is too high and the reward too unlikely. Arming teachers would be a decision destined to backfire.