

Smart boards and handguns: Ohio teachers ready for class

A revised Ohio gun law lets teachers arm themselves after 24 hours of training. Education researchers see unintended consequences and better ways to stop school shootings.

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Robin Chenoweth: Cooper Caffrey likes to play guitar at open-mic nights in local taverns. He's developing his singing voice. He works a lot of hours at his job and is the kind of guy who will get up early on his day off to help a friend. He is in a lot of ways the quintessential, 20-year-old American kid. Except in one, life-transformational way. He's a survivor of a school shooting.

Cooper Caffrey: So, people at work will read something on the internet about it. And they'll be like, Dude, did you get shot? And I'll lie and be like, "No, that's not me." I don't have any issues speaking or thinking about the shooting, but it's not something that I go out of my way to talk about.

Robin Chenoweth: So, the barest of details. When he was 14, his friend pulled a pistol stolen from a relative and shot into the lunchroom of their rural, southern Ohio school. Caffrey was one of two students struck by gunfire.

Cooper Caffrey: I took one bullet through the left side of my abdomen, and I took one through my like, just below my elbow on my left arm.

Robin Chenoweth: Both boys survived, and Caffrey has mostly recovered from the physical injuries except for the metal plate in his arm. But, the other student, not so much. Caffrey makes the most of the life he was blessed to keep, his mother said via text. He doesn't want one horrific day to define him. So, you might never know how he feels about the highly charged topic of guns in schools. But in June, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine signed into law a bill that reduced the training required for teachers to carry guns in schools from 700 hours to 24 hours. Among states that mandate firearm training for school personnel who aren't police, Ohio is now tied with Wyoming for requiring the least training, behind Florida, Texas, South Dakota and Oklahoma. But in the circuitous world of state law, workarounds abound. On the books in Michigan and Minnesota, for example, are exceptions for people who simply have permission from a school principal.

The revisions to the gun law are nearly the same as a controversial 2018 policy adopted by Madison Local District, where Caffrey was shot as an eighth grader. Several families, including Caffrey's, vigorously protested that policy, all the way to the Ohio Supreme Court, which last year ruled against the policy. But now, the new Ohio law allows fast-track gun training for teachers across the state, if their school boards choose to do so. And, so, Cooper Caffrey is speaking up again.

Cooper Caffrey: I have younger siblings in school now. And the fact that they cannot be sure that their teachers are carrying a gun on any given day, it keeps me awake at night I don't understand how a teacher could lead that dual faceted existence of okay, I'm teaching these kids in class now. But I'm also prepared to kill any one of them at any minute. Like, that's, that's such a.... It reminds me so much of like a prison guard mentality.

Robin Chenoweth: This episode of The Ohio State University Inspire Podcast explores the rural/urban divide of a new Ohio gun law that has pitted parents against school boards and administrators, and how one survivor's outlook aligns with an Ohio State scholar who studies why America's schools are targeted for gun violence. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. The federal government does not track school shootings, but a few watchdog groups and media outlets do. An [ongoing analysis](#) by the Washington Post shows that more than 311,000 children have experienced gun violence in schools since the 1999 Columbine shootings. Among those incidents, 558 were killed or injured, including teachers, administrators and resource officers. Everyone agrees the threat is real. The approach to dealing with the problem is where ideas clash. Noelle Arnold is senior associate dean of Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology and an expert on school administration and urban and rural education. I asked Arnold why Ohio districts see solutions so differently.

Robin Chenoweth: After the 24-hour training limit was voted upon and approved, by the governor, all of the major urban districts voted against letting teachers carry guns. But some of the more rural schools are allowing it, or already training their teachers.

Noelle Arnold: I found in these communities that their members operate from their own unique value systems, based on their own place, focus, needs and desires. And, so, there are some researchers that talk about sort of cultural norms in rural communities that may more closely aligned with independence and solving their own problems, such as those around school safety. I'm certainly not a gun rights scholar. However, I am a scholar who's looked at school and community crisis. And in many ways, this safety in school issue mirrors some of the larger societal issues we're all trying to work out. And the same crises, unfortunately, spill over into schools. And so in my work with rural communities, there's been an independence, more confidence in perhaps solving their own problems, rather than having sort of, quote unquote, outside influence on this type of problem-solving. And they often overlap with what are the individual rights of the members in those communities and how those rights intersect with the school environment.

Robin Chenoweth: Ohio State Professor Bryan Warnick, who studies why schools are targeted for acts of gun violence, agrees that the reasons why rural districts choose more often to arm teachers are nuanced.

Bryan Warnick: I think it's a mistake to kind of reduce this to just an outgrowth of the of the larger culture war. There might be reasons why rural schools feel more vulnerable. For one thing, a lot of school shootings have happened in rural communities, rather than in, say, urban

centers. And it is true that it takes longer for law enforcement to respond in a rural setting than it does in an urban setting or simply farther away. So, there might be some legitimate concerns where they feel more vulnerable to school shooting incidents that might be, might be driving this as well. But I think the connection between gun culture and rural settings is certainly a part of it and playing a role in all of this.

Robin Chenoweth: It's not the school shootings don't occur in urban schools. Far from it. According to a study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, urban schools with high minority populations have more shootings overall. Black students experience school shootings at twice the rate of students who are not Black. The difference is the kind of shootings different school environments experience. In urban schools, gun violence tends to be more one-on-one, involving grievances between individuals. But most school-targeted shootings involve indiscriminate killing, and usually occur in less diverse suburban and rural schools. These are the ones that tend to result in school policy changes like Ohio's revised gun law. Arnold, who trains principals, says teachers carrying guns opens up still more issues for which there might not be contingency plans.

Noelle Arnold: And there's a lot of distress on the part of principals on how to regulate this. If we allow this, how will we create policy around this? How will we make sure that the gun is locked up or safe? But then if the gun is locked up or safe, you know, were there an active shooter situation, can that gun even be easily gotten to? So, I find that principals are are, again, having various types of advisory boards. They're certainly talking to parent groups. But that issue around the safety and how to regulate the use of this has been a big issue for principals. And, frankly, they're trying to figure out what that would mean, and what will their role as a principal be in sort of having oversight of this?

Robin Chenoweth: [A tracker](#) by the Giffords Law Center details incidents where guns were left accessible to children in schools. It reads like this: "Ingram, Texas: A school resource officer left a firearm unintended in the bathroom, where it was found by a student. No shots fired." And this one in Sparta, Ohio: "The District Transportation Director left her pistol in a small unlocked plastic case near her desk when she went to the restroom. Two first-graders who were left alone in the office accessed the gun."

Robin Chenoweth: Kids are curious.

Noelle Arnold: Sure.

Robin Chenoweth: You're not really supposed to leave them in a classroom alone. But situations happen and the gun gets left. I mean, does the teacher carry the gun in? Do they carry it out with them? Does it stay in the classroom? Or... there's just so many considerations.

Noelle Arnold: These are the kinds of questions that principals, superintendents, school board members are even grappling with. And there's a real tension, I think, just as an administrator, as a human being, and their own personal feelings around their rights to be safe and the rights

of others in the school environment to be safe. But also, again, on how do we protect some of the most vulnerable people in society, which are children? How are we protecting them in schools? These are some of the questions that they're asking, and there are no easy answers. In my work, what I do is counsel them through asking some of these key questions, and whether they've even thought about these key questions, and whether a new policy or new procedure will actually produce any unwanted consequences, as opposed to some of those wanted impacts. What might be the impacts that you actually don't want, if you institute a new kind of policy or procedure?

Robin Chenoweth: One impact could be changing the relationship between teachers and students, says Bryan Warnick.

Robin Chenoweth: A decent proportion of the shootings that happened in schools, it's one student against another. How does the teacher, in that moment, make the decision to pull the gun out and shoot one of the students?

Bryan Warnick: This is one of my overriding concerns about arming teachers. We can say that the mere presence of firearms, in certain contexts, creates feelings of anxiety and fear Some students will be comfortable with it and others won't. But it will increase this fear and anxiety in students But I'm also worried about how carrying a firearm changes the act of teaching. One of the things I study is how technologies in education change the educational situation; how the tools we use change how we think of ourselves, how we think of the activities that we're doing, and how they affect the relationships of those around us. The tools we use matter, right? I don't think it's so much that teachers will go around shooting students willy-nilly. I'm worried how bringing a gun with you every day, putting it in your backpack, putting it in your purse, strapping it on somehow, how does that change how you think about what you're going to do that day? How does it change how you see yourself as a teacher, your relationships with students? You would think of yourself: I'm arming up It would cast students with a suspicious aura around them. It would decrease that relationship of caring and trust that is so essential to education, because it would cast in teachers' minds classrooms as places of potential violence, and students as potential shooters.

Robin Chenoweth: Parents of color, in particular, worry that in a moment of doubt or fear, their children will be the ones to be shot. I asked Noelle Arnold about this.

Noelle Arnold: I've heard this in my own family. Certainly, any fear is valid for the one who's holding it. However, families of color are confronted daily with the realities of gun violence, and its intersection with racism, other issues of race. One only has to look at the history books or even current events to see some of this play out. This is the power of some community groups, particularly community groups of color, that are really holding communities' and districts' feet to the fire, in terms of how are they going to protect against some of these things, particularly when a lot of schools and districts indicate that they have a mission and vision around safety, inclusiveness? Parents of color are saying, is my child included in your safety mission and your inclusive mission? And are you thinking about the consequences that we see in society? How

are you going to protect against those same consequences if they play out in the school? And these are some of the things that I think states and districts in are going to have to grapple with.

Robin Chenoweth: Cooper Caffrey said he felt a shift in the culture of his school after the board approved training for teachers.

Cooper Caffrey: It was causing me, a lot of stress because I knew one particular teacher that I had in my class rotation that was very vocal about wanting to be armed. And after this program was approved by the school board, I, I felt that he most likely was carrying in a class that I was in and I was not comfortable with that.

Robin Chenoweth: Could you see the gun?

Cooper Caffrey: I could not. But he was he would wear outfits that you couldn't rule it out. But you couldn't be sure that.... you know what I mean?

Robin Chenoweth: Yeah, you were just generally uncomfortable with the idea that he might be, right?

Cooper Caffrey: Yeah. Or even if he didn't have it on him, it being in his desk arguably is worse because it's not locked and a student could just walk up to his desk and take it out. Like, if it's going to be in a safe, then I don't even know.

Robin Chenoweth: The district's policy allowed 10 staffers to carry weapons on campus, if they received 24-hour gun safety training and eight hours of concealed carry license training. Like the newly revised state law, just who carried the guns was not public record. So Caffrey and families had no real way of knowing. Implementing the policy in Madison Township schools served as a sort of a petri dish for what might now follow in Ohio. But the shooting months before also continues to reverberate through the community. Seventeen months after Caffrey was shot in his lunchroom, 17 students were killed by a gunman at the gunman's former high school in Parkland, Florida. Caffrey, then a freshman, and 42 fellow students participated in National School Walkout Day in solidarity with Parkland students. They all received an in-school detention. Media and social media blew up, thrusting the school into the limelight once again.

Cooper Caffrey: I wasn't planning on walking out. I was going to sit in my class and do my schoolwork Our principal and superintendent comes on the loudspeaker and says, anybody that is participating in the National School Walkout will be subject to disciplinary action. And it struck me, like, there was a shooting here. You're really going to tell people that they can't express some sort of sentiment about gun violence, because you have your own political agenda? Really? So, in that moment, I got out of my desk and I walked out the door and the resource officer and assistant principals stopped and confronted me and they were like, are you really going to make this difficult for us? I was like, I don't know. Do you think the kids at Parkland had it easy?

Robin Chenoweth: A month later, the schoolboard introduced the new gun policy. It wasn't long before Caffrey's family decided to move from the district. If the shooting had pulled a community together, this was driving some of them apart. I asked Caffrey what he thought would have happened if the situation were flipped.

Robin Chenoweth: So, if the teachers in that school had been armed, what do you think would have happened that day?

Cooper Caffrey: The absolute same thing; the same exact thing. We were in the cafeteria, so, there were no teachers there. So, if a teacher had been armed, worst case scenario, a teacher would have heard the gunshots and pulled a gun out and fired prematurely and caused property damage or additional injury People don't understand about these incidents, these active shooting incidences. They think it's like a movie; it's this drawn out, 15-minute scene where the shooter pulls it out and yells something scary and then walks around... Like, no. The shooting was done in about three seconds. Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, and then he's gone. There was no, there was no time for anybody to react To expect a teacher to be able to go from teaching a class to finding an active shooter in a matter of seconds, I think is unrealistic. It's not a good solution to the problem. And, to reiterate, I don't think that anything would have been different, at least in my shooting, had the teachers been armed. I think the only thing it could have done is made things worse.

Robin Chenoweth: Across the United States, districts spent an estimated [\\$3.1 billion on school security](#) in 2021 — bulletproof glass, locks, cameras, metal detectors. They spent billions more on armed resource officers. But for all that, research shows it's not working.

Bryan Warnick: The overwhelming voice of the research says that layering these security technologies, one on top of another, in our school environments actually does not make schools safer. It does not decrease levels of violence; it sometimes moves the violence to different places

Robin Chenoweth: Like to sporting events, buses or the school parking lot.

Bryan Warnick: But it doesn't make schools safer. The evidence is pretty clear about that.

Robin Chenoweth: Will guns in teachers' hands help stop an active shooter?

Bryan Warnick: As a scholar, I want to turn to the research. There's a lot of different ways to ask that question. You could ask, does arming teachers or other school staff, does that make schools safer in the sense of preventing school shootings? It's such a new phenomenon, I think that we simply don't know There is some research on whether having armed school resource officers serves to prevent school shootings or stop school shootings. And here the evidence seems to be, no, that having armed law enforcement in schools does not prevent or stop school shootings.-Uvalde, Marjorie Stillman Douglas High School, these all had armed school resource

officers and it was not successful in preventing the carnage that ensued It's hard to grapple with the emotions of the moment, even for professionals, professionals who are trained in how to handle the situation and perhaps know what they should be doing. Even in those situations, nothing seems to happen, as we expect. And I guess that highlights all the more why it's incredibly far-fetched to think of teachers with so little training, being able to navigate such situations.

Robin Chenoweth: So, where does that leave us? Warnick has chosen to focus his work on understanding the core of the problem. After the Sandy Hook shootings, he began looking closely at the people who perpetrate school shootings.

Bryan Warnick: I wanted to try to think about this more deeply. I wanted to try to understand why these things happened Why are schools chosen to be places of mass violence? What is it about the meaning of education or schooling in America that seems to lend itself to these, to these incidents? I mean, you can think of a lot of places where mass violence could occur. It could occur in shopping malls. It could occur in movie theaters. It does sometimes. But why are schools so often chosen as venues for violence? So that was a question that led me to think more deeply about school shootings.

Robin Chenoweth: He and fellow researchers immersed themselves in the tragic stories surrounding American school shooters. It was difficult to make generalizations, they wrote. Some were bullied, others were bullies themselves. Some had dysfunctional homes, others did not. Some had quarrels with specific people in the school. All had easy access to firearms and saw the school as an appropriate place to use them.

Bryan Warnick: Schools are sometimes understood as places of coercion and violence. They're often places where we force kids to do things against their will. They're places where they're punished, sometimes, even with physical punishment When schools are like this, when they're coercive, they kind of send the message that these are places where force is appropriate.

Robin Chenoweth: There tends to be this common denominator, there's a lot of young men who are angry.

Bryan Warnick: Yes, often male, often suburban, often white. So, there are elements of kind of thwarted masculinity in all of this as well Young men are expected to be athletes to win dates and sexual success. And when they're not able to achieve that, that resentment sort of builds up and can explode sometimes in school shootings.

Robin Chenoweth: Warnick and other researchers call this the Status Tournament of Adolescence. Honor roll for some kids, remedial classes for others. Varsity team status for some; others don't make the team at all.

Bryan Warnick: We sort kids into winners and losers. We crown kings and queens of prom events. And this lends itself to a certain sort of resentment directed at the school itself by some students.

Robin Chenoweth: Of course, plenty of kids learn to cope with rejection. They move on. The question is, why? What do they have that the shooters need to cope? The boy who shot Caffrey told investigators that he was always in trouble over his poor grades, that his homelife was troubled and he didn't feel his family accepted him. He overdosed on Ativan the day of the shootings. The handgun he took from a relative was not secured. No one even missed it until it was too late. Could the school have done something more? Bryan Warnick.

Bryan Warnick: We need to turn away from looking just at schools, as being the solution to school shootings and take a hard look at ourselves and try to get the political will and courage to do something in our larger society, about the prevalence of firearms and about the mental health issues. And only then will we make our schools safe There are things we can do in schools, but they're often they're often not what we think about. They have to do with relationships and building bridges and watching out for students rather than building up schools as fortresses Increasing the mental health resources that we have in schools, the counseling staff, just so that we're able to better care for students who might be in trouble or who are suffering from various mental health issues Really make schools into communities of trust where students feel like they have good relationships with teachers and other school staff. Where students feel like they can turn to trusted adults if they sense that something is going wrong with one of their peers. We need to get real here. If we're going to try to increase school safety, it's got to be a multi-pronged effort. And not just this target hardening approach which we so often see.

Robin Chenoweth: Though he is one of the 558 since Columbine who'd been shot in a school, he might be the only one, or among a distinct few, who was able to confront his shooter with grace after the fact. He read a statement at the boy's sentencing.

Caffrey in TV news clip: We all sat around at wrestling tournaments and eat doughnuts and listen to music. We were going to go fishing this summer with my dad. I want you to know that I forgive you. People think that's crazy and keep telling me I should be mad and I have a right to be mad, but I'm not. It hurts that my friend would choose to hurt all these people. It's hard to watch the community react to this.

Robin Chenoweth: The boy who shot him wasn't the friend he knew, Caffrey said. That frightened kid pointing the gun at him, that was somebody else. I asked Caffrey his motivation for reading the letter.

Cooper Caffrey: I don't see what the demonization of a 13- or 14-year-old boy does to fix any situation. So, I mean, at the end of the day, he is a human. No matter how horrific what he's done is, he's a human being. And, putting him in a box and checking off that he's evil was not

going to help prevent this in the future. It's not going to help us understand it now. So, what's the point?

Robin Chenoweth: Some might say this was a tragedy where grace could be offered. No one died. No one lost a child or a sibling. But in the aftermath of a crisis, Cooper Caffrey made people see the humanity in a boy who could have easily killed him. It's what the scholarship of Bryan Warnick and other researchers implores us to do. So that next time, just maybe, the frustration and anger of another troubled young man doesn't find expression in still another tragedy.

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