

# [***I was expelled from the Tennessee legislature for advocating for gun control. They still don't get it***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTG-8Y21-DY7V-G004-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** Opinion by Justin J. Pearson

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Tennessee lawmakers passed [*legislation on Tuesday allowing teachers*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/us/tennessee-teachers-gun-carry-bill/index.html) and school personnel to carry guns in the classroom. The bill now heads to Republican Gov. Bill Lee, but will become law with or without his signature unless he vetoes it.

The measure is the latest proof that - a full year after the devastating mass shooting atThe Covenant High School in Nashville that killed six people - our state's political leaders are no closer to providing meaningful, viable solutions to address our state's tragic gun violence problem.

Guns are still the [*leading cause*](https://everytownresearch.org/graph/firearms-are-the-leading-cause-of-death-for-american-children-and-teens/) of death in children and teens in America, and Tennessee continues to be plagued by one of the [*highest rates*](https://www.sycamoreinstitutetn.org/firearm-related-deaths-tn/) of violence perpetrated with firearms in the country. The Republican supermajority that controls our state's General Assembly, tragically, have reneged on their responsibility to pass meaningful gun safety legislation.

If Republicans have failed to make inroads in combating senseless gun violence, it cannot be because they are unaware of the seriousness of the problem. The magnitude of our gun violence problem was made clear to residents of Tennessee and the entire nation last March after a shooter armed with a weapon of war carried out the [*massacre*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/03/us/covenant-school-shooting-nashville-tennessee-monday/index.html) at The Covenant School. Among the dead were three children, 9-year-olds Hallie Scruggs, Evelyn Dieckhaus and William Kinney.

Here's what Republican lawmakers could do instead of passing measures that would introduce even more guns into our public spaces, and now potentially our classrooms: They could listen to some of the parents who have been appalled at the idea that the adults to whom they have entrusted their children's care at school every day might be carrying loaded guns.

One such mom, Beth Gebhard, whose son attended The Covenant School told me after the shooting that quick action by her son's teacher might have saved his life that day, as well as the lives of all of the other children in the class. But it's not because the teacher confronted the shooter with a gun. Far from it.

"My son was in a second-grade classroom close to where the children were slain. The children heard the intensely loud, repeated shots," Beth told me.

"I know the primary reason he's still alive is that his teacher - under extreme duress - was able to follow her training to lock the classroom door, pull down the shades, shepherd the children to the safe corner of the room and be there with them, helping them to follow her breathing and to stay silent so the Nashville police officers could do their work."

Beth knows that guns belong in the hands of trained professionals who are best equipped to meet the threat posed by a gunman. Putting firearms into the hands of classroom teachers and administrators every day is simply asking for more heartache and tragedy.

Here's some more wisdom that Tennessee lawmakers could glean from parents: Immediately following The Covenant School massacre, grieving parents lined the streets and the entrance to the Tennessee State House, demanding common sense gun safety laws.

[*Students walked out of schools*](https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2023/04/03/covenant-school-protests-week-after-the-deadly-nashville-school-shooting/70076073007/) across Nashville and Memphis making similar demands. We've seen a groundswell [*of similar protests in recent*](https://wpde.com/news/nation-world/tennessee-parents-students-educators-protest-bill-to-arm-teachers-its-ludicrous-covenant-school-shooting-tragedy-second-amendment-legislation-politics-gun-reform-safety) days, as parents and students raise their voices in opposition to the measure being considered in the House that could put guns in the hands of their teachers. The protests continued right through to Tuesday's vote: After it was taken, people in the room could be heard [*chanting, "Blood on your hands*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/us/tennessee-teachers-gun-carry-bill/index.html)."

Similar sentiments have echoed across the country. A [*strong majority*](https://news.gallup.com/poll/513623/majority-continues-favor-stricter-gun-laws.aspx#:~:text=Fifty%2Dsix%20percent%20of%20U.S.,Parkland%2C%20Florida%2C%20in%202018.) of Americans favor stricter gun safety laws in the US, according to a Gallup poll, and a similar majority of teachers believe arming them would make schools [*less safe*](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2641-1.html), according to research by the Rand Corporation. In Tennessee, a wide majority - about three-quarters of registered voters - want red flag laws, according to [*polling last year from Vanderbilt University*](https://www.vanderbilt.edu/csdi/Spring_2023slides_final.pdf).

There is one more group that Tennessee lawmakers should consult with before passing a measure that could make our gun violence problem even worse: The members of the law enforcement community who are directly tasked with keeping schools safe.

The [*National Association of School Resource Officers*](https://www.nasro.org/news/2018/02/22/news-releases/nasro-opposes-arming-teachers/) (NASRO) also opposes arming teachers, and their research data aligns with the fears of teachers and school staff. Among other warnings, NASRO reports that a law enforcement officer could mistake an armed teacher for an assailant and that discharging weapons in a school is an "extremely risky action" that could result in wounding or killing innocent children and staff.

Their data also indicate that an armed teacher is more likely to interfere with first responders' actions than to stop a school shooter. Besides all of the data indicating the dangers of arming teachers, the training outlined in the proposed bill is insufficient to prepare teachers to safely carry and operate a weapon in the event of a mass shooting.

Unfortunately, rather than heeding wise counsel on the subject of reducing gun violence, our legislature has frequently resorted to reactive and even anti-democratic tactics.

Tennessee state Rep. Justin Jones, Rep. Gloria Johnson and I responded to the pleas of our constituents and the mourners outside and inside the State House last year, joining them in peaceful protest against a conservative majority that refused to listen.

However, on that day and every day since, the majority party lawmakers appear to answer to a different constituency - the [*Tennessee Firearms Association*](https://tennesseefirearms.com/) and the [*National Rifle Association*](https://home.nra.org/). And they responded to our efforts to represent the grieving people of Tennessee by expelling Jones and me - two Black men - from our duly elected offices.

Although our municipal governments promptly reinstated us and our constituents voted us back into office, the supermajority in the Tennessee State House is still trying to silence us. Despite the retribution ***politics*** that dominate the Republican agenda, we refuse to be silent. We will not sit still and be quiet while our children and communities are ravaged by gun violence.

Arming teachers [*increases*](https://www.everytown.org/solutions/arming-teachers/) the likelihood of shootings in schools, increases the chance that students will have access to guns and erodes trust in educators. A teacher with a handgun is unable to stop a shooter with a military-style weapon, and teachers aren't able to respond in the ways trained law enforcement agents can. Adverse impacts - including fatal outcomes - will [*disproportionately*](https://www.acluwv.org/en/news/four-reasons-why-arming-schoolteachers-wont-make-schools-safer) fall on already marginalized populations such as disabled and Black students.

According to the national teachers' union the American Federation of Teachers, more than [*three in four teachers*](https://www.aft.org/press-release/under-siege-survey-teachers-finds-34-point-increase-job-dissatisfaction)  oppose putting guns in the hands of educators and school staff, stating that schools would be more dangerous if staff were armed. [*Most parents*](https://news.yahoo.com/poll-most-parents-oppose-arming-194325560.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAACtgUp1buqIW7hCbHK2eXL7dXs4K1F7F7wmt2qq7lGRykLz9BExnGDP4DtNJ6NXgmu86uMwirSatAzZQ5TpV6YofRFbW-r7AiGeOuZ-mJw_CmlBS1uLw0700er02fmYdR-JChiMI11InOKMxtmzbMA1SkLSKdMjvaITDwYqsQ8wH), as well as [*students*](https://studentsdemandaction.org/report/stop-arming-teachers-toolkit/#:~:text=Why%20is%20Arming%20Teachers%20Harmful?%20Arming%20teachers,others%20the%20importance%20of%20opposing%20arming%20teachers.), oppose arming teachers.

"Arming teachers is not the answer to school shootings - it's a dangerous next step in the gun lobby's 'guns everywhere' agenda. We need to vote these reckless politicians out and elect lawmakers who will fight for the common sense, research-backed gun safety laws that Tennesseans deserve," says Angela Ferrell-Zabala, executive director of Moms Demand Action, the anti-gun violence group founded after another horrific school mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in December 2012.

As parents tell me time and again, guns in classrooms simply are not the answer. "Can you imagine what would have happened if my son's teacher left the classroom with a handgun to confront the shooter with military-grade weapons?" Beth asked me. "Not only would she have been killed, but she would have left terrified 8-year-olds alone - many likely crying and some following her - alerting the shooter to their presence. I have no doubt my son wouldn't have survived."

Arming teachers does not create the school environment we want or need. Students deserve better. They deserve nurturing and care in a trusting and productive educational environment where they can thrive.

This moment requires our highest reasoning and the best of our efforts. It requires elected officials to do everything we can to end the gun violence epidemic plaguing our communities, our state and our nation. But the bill approved by our state legislature is a red herring that not only prevents us from dealing with the problem of gun safety and fear in schools, but also puts our kids and teachers in more danger.

We need what a vast majority of Tennessee voters and voters nationwide want: common sense gun legislation. These include those articulated by [*Covenant Families for Brighter Tomorrows*](https://www.covenantbrightertomorrows.org/) and [*Mothers Over Murder*](https://www.nashvillepeacemakers.org/mothers-over-murder), who are calling for more counseling for children, closing gun-buying loopholes, mandating stronger background checks and passing safer storage laws.

We must do right by our children and our communities. We can only do that by listening to them, rather than to those who profit from gun violence.

Opinion by Justin J. Pearson

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