

State law requires Tennessee public school teachers to teach gun safety starting in kindergarten

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In an unprecedented assault on education that pushes the normalization of firearms in the classroom, Tennessee has become the first state to force educators to teach gun safety.

House Bill (HB) 2882, which passed the Tennessee General Assembly on May 1, 2024, went into effect with the start of the 2025-2026 school year. Every charter school and local education agency (LEA) must “provide students with age-appropriate and grade appropriate instruction on firearm safety” on an annual basis. The legislation prevents districts from opting out.

The bill states that such instruction should begin at the “earliest appropriate grade.” But the Outcomes and Guidance manual, developed by the Tennessee Department of Education in collaboration with the Tennessee Department of Safety & Homeland Security and Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, clearly indicates that instruction will begin at the Kindergarten level.

The manual itself divides instruction into three distinct grade ranges: K-2; 3-5; 6-12. The first two grade groupings primarily focus on familiarizing children with firearm nomenclature, identifying the difference between a toy and a real firearm, and the importance of telling an adult if a child finds a firearm. The third grade grouping focuses on teaching “All family members” “safe gun handling” and including the proper storage of firearms and ammunition.

This is not the first time that the Tennessee legislature has sought to shift the responsibility of mitigating gun violence onto educators. In the aftermath of the 2023 school shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville, which left three children and three adults dead, Senate

Bill (SB) 1325—a “school safety” bill—was passed which allowed educators to carry firearms in schools. Iowa and Wyoming passed similar bills; however, Wyoming’s bill was later vetoed by the governor.

Under that law, teachers would be forced into the role of armed guards—required to undergo 40 hours of training, pass a psychological evaluation, obtain a handgun permit, and even submit their fingerprints. While the legislation shields school districts from financial liability, it leaves individual educators exposed to legal and personal risk. Parents, meanwhile, are not even guaranteed the right to know if their child’s teacher is carrying a firearm in the classroom.

No district has adopted the policy so far, yet its very passage reveals the reactionary fantasy underpinning it: the notion that arming “good guys with guns” is the only way to stop “bad guys with guns.” This logic not only evades the social questions behind mass shootings but also entrenches the broader militarization of schools and American society as a whole.

The group Everytown for Gun Safety shows that Tennessee ranks 12th in the nation for gun deaths, with 158 unintentional shootings by children between 2015-2023, the third highest of any state. Yet lawmakers proudly maintain some of the weakest gun laws in the country: there is no requirement for secure firearm storage, and even the basic permit for concealed carry has been scrapped. Against this backdrop, the push for “gun safety education” in schools is not to protect children, but to disguise the deadly status quo and palm responsibility onto individuals.

In championing SB 1325, Republican state representative Ryan Williams stated that “We know,

some of us know, that sometimes somebody will go to place A to shoot up a school or do something negative and they end up going somewhere else because they're deterred". This statement peddles the myth of "more good guys with guns."

A practice that is already in full swing, as the Tennessee legislature has funneled more money into School Resource Officers (SROs)—often off-duty police officers—allocating an additional \$140 million in 2023 to ensure every public school has at least one armed officer. Meanwhile, Nashville's public school system faces a shortage of teachers and bus drivers.

Far from protecting students, the reliance on SROs has transformed schools into gateways to prison. Instead of resolving behavior in ways that foster safety, children are expelled or arrested for minor infractions, effectively criminalizing them.

The presence of an SRO does not ensure student safety. This was made tragically clear at Antioch High School in Nashville, where despite having two armed officers on campus, a shooting left one student dead and two others wounded.

In response to the passage of SB 1325, in April 2023, nearly 200 Nashville High School students walked out of class to protest outside the Tennessee State Capitol. They could be heard chanting "Hey, hey, ho, ho. Guns in schools have got to go."

The Tennessee Education Association (TEA) and the national National Education Association (NEA) have offered little more than symbolic opposition, calling instead for "common-sense gun reform" and expanded mental health services.

By limiting their response to token opposition and predictable calls for minimal, "common-sense" gun reform and mental health funding, the Democrats, TEA and NEA reinforce the falsehood that mass shootings are simply the result of troubled individuals and are isolated events. In doing so, they seek to obscure the underlying social and political catalysts that trigger mass violence.

Neither of the major capitalist parties offer a path to ending mass shootings or gun violence in the United States. These tragedies are symptoms of a society in an advanced stage of degeneration, where decades of endless war, staggering inequality, police brutality, ICE raids against students and families, and the dismantling of public infrastructure, have created the conditions for

recurring eruptions of mass violence.

Amid the deepening crisis of capitalism, public education has become a central target. The ruling class seeks to roll back decades of social progress, crush opposition, and extinguish critical thought and culture. Defending the right to free, high-quality education demands a conscious fight against capitalism and imperialist war—not futile appeals to the courts or the Democrats.

Trump's so-called "Big Beautiful Bill", passed with bipartisan support, cut \$12 billion from public schools, on top of the expiration of pandemic aid. The results have been devastating: teacher layoffs, overcrowded classrooms, gutted health services, and a surge in child hunger.

Within this backdrop, Tennessee educators have already voiced their concern on how HB 2882 will be funded through the social media platform *Reddit*.

"How will this get paid for? They'll just use the arts budget, since they've decided that learning about or participating in the arts isn't important".

Another post read "How about they also teach us about 401ks and retirement savings, so people aren't forced to work till they die?"

Union bureaucrats throughout the US, far from leading resistance, trap teachers in dead-end lobbying, token protests and electoral diversions designed to safeguard the status quo. Teachers must draw a clear conclusion: the fight to save public education cannot be waged through the Democrats nor union officials. Only independent rank-and-file committees, organized to mobilize mass action, can lead this struggle.

The battle for public education is inseparable from the broader fight against war, dictatorship, and capitalist rule. The only way forward is through the building of the Educators International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Through these committees teachers can shatter the grip of the union bureaucracy and establish genuine democratic control over their fight.



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