

Gun Owners of Vermont H.314 written Testimony.

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the Education Committee, my name is Eric Davis and I am the president of Gun Owners of Vermont, and all-volunteer, non-profit advocacy group dedicated to the preservation of the right to keep and bear arms.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify today on Bill H.314, and I understand that this committee is very busy, so I will attempt to address our concerns as briefly and concisely as possible.

It is our understanding that this bill seeks to take the existing prohibition on carrying firearms inside school buildings and expand it to all school grounds and property owned, leased, controlled, or subcontracted by schools in the state of Vermont.

Our primary concern with this legislation is that it would restrict the rights of parents, guardians, family members, and any other affiliated parties to carry a firearm (or any other weapon for that matter) for lawful purposes, in a laundry list of different public places, many of which they likely would not be aware were controlled by schools.

The first and most obvious scenario is finding oneself on the business end of the law for simply having a weapon in the vehicle when picking your kids up from school (and I can't stress how common this is, especially in rural areas of the state and during times like hunting season.) This alone is cause for great concern to many Vermonters, but the implications of this bill reach much, much farther than that.

Under this legislation, one might be criminalized for:

-Carrying a weapon for self-defense or even leaving it locked in a personal vehicle while at a sporting event.

-Unwittingly crossing a piece of wooded area owned by a school while hunting.

-Wandering too close to the kids' bake sale booth at a local community event, while lawfully carrying.

-Driving down the wrong street or turning around in a parking lot that happens to be owned or controlled by a school while having an otherwise legal weapon in the vehicle.

-Carrying a weapon for protection) on public hiking trails that are owned in title utilized by local schools and colleges; a prime example of such are the massive chunks of land owned and used by Norwich

University in my hometown of Northfield. (Even something as simple as bear spray under the definition set forth here might apply)

I could go on, but I think the nexus here is why we now feel the need to make this expansion of law which creates an impossible patchwork of prohibited areas and confusion, and will most certainly ensnare only good, law-abiding people. If the state already has a law on the books that will accomplish everything that this sort of law might functionally accomplish -and we do- then is this redundancy really necessary, especially when it carries such tremendous potential to harm the folks who are not a threat to safety? We believe the answer to that question is a resounding “no.”

Additionally, I would like to voice our concerns about expanding what are commonly known as “gun free zones” which have repeatedly shown the propensity for attracting those who are intent on causing harm on a mass scale.

If I may give a quick anecdote, I have two small children of my own, one of whom is old enough to attend preschool which he began this year. As I mentioned before, we live near Northfield, across the town line in Roxbury which puts us in the same school district with Montpelier – one of the schools which recently received a hoax report of a school shooting.

We get phone and email updates from the district about closures and things as such and I can’t begin to describe the awful feeling that I got a few weeks ago when I got notifications that our son’s school had gone into lockdown because of a potential shooting threat.

After the dust settled and things returned to normal, my wife and I made a few inquiries at the Roxbury Village School regarding their security policies. The Roxbury school is a good place for kids to grow and learn; we feel that our son enjoys it very much, and we feel that overall, they a good job at what they do. Their answers regarding security, however, were succinct, but a bit lacking, in our opinion.

They told us about how the school remains locked at all times which obviously in the event of an attack would protect the kids a bit more if they were inside as opposed to outside at play. The preschoolers are outside a lot; they frequently go for walks in “the forest” behind the school to learn about nature and science – a place where they would have no meaningful protection. If they are inside, they would be ushered into a “safe room” which is basically a closet with no windows – where they are told to crouch low and be quiet.

When we asked the administrator if there was anyone on the premises who was trained in applied violence, and who was equipped and capable of responding to an attack with deadly force i.e.,

designated security personnel, she got this kind of awkward look about her and answered something to the affect that “ehh, that’s not really what we do.”

This information alone was already unsettling enough to get us seriously considering removing our child from public school and I can personally testify to the fact that if this new legislation is passed, it would make us feel substantially LESS safe, not more.

This bill would criminalize anyone in the surrounding area who could effectively respond to, and stop an attack. I can only speculate that this might attract bad actors intent on harming children -it may or may not do so- but I am absolutely certain that it would serve to disarm and deter someone who might act as a good Samaritan and take measures to mitigate the damage in the event of a catastrophe.

We are as disturbed and disgusted as everyone else at the recent rise of violence and school shootings in this country and we certainly understand the urgency to do something about it, but we firmly believe this approach to be fatally flawed in multiple ways.

We make this point often and it bears repeating – that when you remove the ability of good people to defend themselves and their families, it removes the deterrence for bad people to do harm.

We respectfully ask that no further action be taken on this bill as there are already sufficient laws to its effect and we believe that any expansion will do far more harm than good.

I would again like to thank the committee for the opportunity to share our thoughts on the matter and we look forward to participating in any discussions going forward.

In Liberty,
Eric Davis
President, Gun Owners of Vermont.