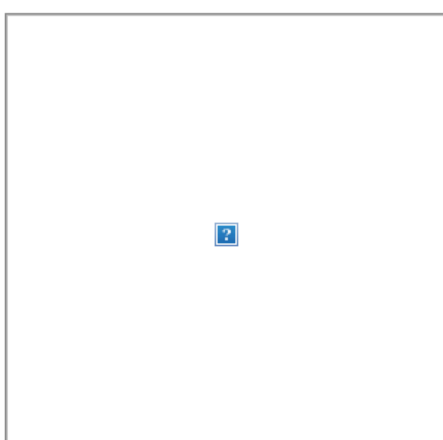
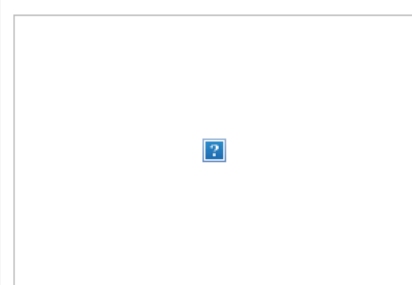




WomanScope NewsMagazine > Education > Our Children Need Safe Schools, Not Prisons

Our Children Need Safe Schools, Not Prisons

By Vanessa Wamsley, Staff Writer
 April 13, 2013
 Filed under [Education](#)



Every child deserves to feel safe at their school desk. Gun control may divide the nation, but educators, parents, and politicians place a high premium on the safety of our school children. Unfortunately, consensus on the best way to ensure safety in our schools eludes everyone involved; proposals from arming teachers to continuing the status quo enflame each side. Installing armed security officers in every school emerges as the most popular solution, but even this answer draws ire from some corners. The discord boils down to one basic question: What should schools change in order to ensure the safest possible environment for students?

In the aftermath of the tragic school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 14, the issue of safer schools moved to the forefront of discussions across the nation. Less than a week after the shooting, The National Rifle Association's Wayne LaPierre challenged Congress to put armed guards in every American school. He insisted that guns in schools would protect children from school shootings better than gun control legislation, provoking both protest and acclaim. "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," LaPierre said.

When I heard that gem, I thought he was crazy. "I don't want to send my son to school in a prison," I told my neighbor. Metal detectors already adorn the hallways. I suppose bars on the windows are next. But watching the issue carefully over the next two months, I realized few others share my reaction.

On Jan. 31, the Newtown Board of Education sided with LaPierre when it requested school safety officers for each of its elementary schools. The guards already patrolled the halls of the middle and high schools.

On Jan. 16, spurred by the events at Sandy Hook and by increasing gun violence in Chicago, President Obama announced a four-part plan for curbing gun violence. One of his 23 executive actions on gun violence includes the order: "Provide law enforcement, first responders, and school officials with proper training for active shooter situations."

Currently, four gun control bills sit before the Senate Judiciary Committee. One of the bills, introduced by Senator Barbara Boxer of California, addresses school safety directly. Her bill expands the Justice Department's current grants to provide schools with more resources to install tip lines, surveillance equipment, secured entrances and other important safety measures. The bill also creates a joint task force between the Justice Department and the Department of Education to develop new school safety guidelines. "We owe it to our children and our grandchildren to ensure that they are safe when they are at school," Senator Boxer said.

Sen. Boxer introduced a second school safety bill in December along with the bill currently before the judiciary committee. Her "Save Our Students" plan allows the federal government to reimburse governors who station National Guard troops at schools.

Clearly, installing safety officers in schools has emerged in the last few months as the most popular solution for protecting children in schools. In fact, according to an ABC News poll, 55 percent of Americans support armed guards in schools.

So the NRA's Wayne LaPierre seems to be winning the argument.

Yet I think back to my first reaction: I don't want my son to attend school in a prison. The security officer solution seems too simple for such a complicated situation. An armed guard is not nearly enough to prevent school violence. Unfortunately, the school shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 provides the best evidence; an armed security officer on the school grounds was unable to stop two students from killing 15 and wounding 23.

Even Sen. Boxer admits that her bills must be part of a larger comprehensive response to the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

No simple answer exists. Lawmakers and lobbyists choose to focus on what legislation can be enacted to prevent school violence. Laws will pass, and security officers will most likely appear in most schools. When handled appropriately, students could benefit from positive interaction with law enforcement. But legislation can only be a piece, a very tiny piece, of the larger picture.

As a community, we must shoulder some responsibility. What kind of environment does the local school foster? Are children afraid to walk to school? Are parents frustrated with bullying? Are students comfortable reporting incidents, from bullying to fighting to suspicious people in the halls? Are parents welcomed to the school? Do parents ask their children if they feel safe or if they notice anything that does not seem right?

If I ever darkened the door of the local school, I could answer these questions.

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 - ➔ [January 2013](#)
 - ➔ [December 2012](#)
 - ➔ [November 2012](#)
 - ➔ [October 2012](#)
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