

1. Arms Against a Sea of Trouble

Even following the Bath, Michigan School Disaster of 1926 in which 45 victims died, people thought of schools as safe places for students to study and learn. Over the years, many killings have taken place at schools, typically involving fewer than six victims. But in the past few years, several incidents have begun to change public opinion. In the aftermath of the University of Texas shootings (1966), in which 14 people died, and the Columbine High School Massacre (1999) that claimed 12 victims, public outcry involved, among other things, efforts to toughen the gun laws and make it a crime for minors and convicted criminals to buy weapons. Most recently the killing of 32 people at Virginia Tech (2007) has provoked a different sort of reaction.

Laws about guns on campuses vary from state to state. Utah, for example, explicitly requires public universities to allow properly licensed students to carry guns on campus. Several states leave the decision up to the colleges. “Students for Concealed Carry on Campus” formed shortly after the Virginia Tech killings. The national grassroots movement supports letting anyone who may legally own a gun – but especially licensed, trained individuals – carry a concealed weapon onto college campuses for the purpose of self defense. Currently, the organization claims more than 40,000 members.

The Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 mandates that every state receiving federal funds under the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965 (ESEA) have in effect a law requiring K-12 public schools to expel for a period of not less than one year any student found to have brought a weapon or explosive to school. Each state’s laws, however, also must allow the school superintendent to modify the expulsion requirement on a case-by-case basis. (20 U.S.C. 8921 (b)(1))

In 2008 the school district of Harrold, Texas approved a change in district policy to allow teachers and staff to carry concealed guns at the local high school, under certain conditions. Besides being licensed by the State of Texas to carry a concealed handgun, school personnel must also undergo training in crisis management and hostile situations, and their ammunition must be designed to minimize ricochets. Some have argued that the traditional “gun free” zones created by schools simply invite would-be assailants by announcing that their intended victims will have no adequate defense.