





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Arming teachers is not popular. So why are Florida lawmakers embracing the idea?

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The idea of arming teachers doesn't sit well with most people.

Just 37 percent of Florida voters want teachers to carry guns and 51 percent oppose the idea, including 71 percent of Democrats, 52 percent of independents and 30 percent of Republicans, according to a Florida Atlantic University poll released last week.

The skeptics include some prominent GOP lawmakers.

"I'm against that — I don't care where anybody's at on that," U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, R-Longboat Key, said when asked in a recent interview about arming teachers.

Yet the GOP-controlled Florida Legislature continues to push for armed educators. The Senate Education Committee signed off on a bill last week that would allow any Florida teacher who volunteers and goes through

The measure appears to have a good chance of becoming law.

be the most significant public policy change to arise out of the shooting last year that Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland.

picturing them packing heat.

"I mean the teachers I had, I can't imagine," Buchanan said.

Yet while most Florida voters are aligned with Buchanan on the issue, a majority of his own party is not. The FAU survey found that 59 percent of Florida Republicans favor arming teachers.

"A sizable majority of the Legislature is Republican so it doesn't surprise me too much that they are going to follow through on a policy that Republicans like," said FAU political science professor Kevin Wagner.

The growing support within the GOP for armed teachers explains why the proposal has gained traction. President Donald Trump's endorsement of the idea after Parkland may have helped bring it into the mainstream.

Wagner said there has been broad consensus about the need to improve school safety after Parkland. But settling on a particular policy — or set of policies — is more difficult.

"Part of what comes across consistently about numbers in this area is that people think something should be done and often times it's hard to come up with a solution that everyone agrees with," Wagner said. "But in this particular case it's an area more Republicans can agree on."

The idea of arming teachers has long been championed by the National Rifle Association and the group's allies, who argue that having more armed individuals on campuses would deter school shooters and improve response times when an attack does occur.

For years, the leading champion in Florida for arming teachers was U.S. Rep. Greg Steube, a Sarasota Republican who is known as a staunch gun rights advocate.

As a state representative, Steube sponsored a bill for three years in a row that would have allowed certain teachers with training to carry a concealed weapon on campus if school district officials gave approval. Steube's bill cleared the

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with training to carry a concealed weapon on campus if school district officials gave approval. Steube's bill cleared the House one year but stalled in the Senate.

But since Parkland, more moderate Republicans and even some Democrats have been willing to put guns in the hands of teachers.

Lawmakers opened the door to arming teachers last year, approving a bill that allows trained school personnel — including some teachers — to carry guns on campus.

The bill limited the type of teacher who can carry a weapon, excluding those who “exclusively perform classroom duties.” That provision meant the majority of teachers in Florida were left out of the guardian program.

A number of Democrats voted for the legislation, which was touted as a compromise and also included new gun control measures, money for school security and a long list of other school safety measures.

Now legislative leaders want any teacher to be able to carry a gun. That was one of the recommendations put forward by a state commission investigating the Parkland shooting.

The Parkland commission — a group that included law enforcement officers, educators, mental health experts, elected officials and relatives of the victims — appears to have provided further momentum for making armed instructors ubiquitous in Florida schools. Only one of the 15 commission members, the father of a murdered student, voted against the recommendation to arm teachers.

“I want to go back to the work of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Commission,” state Sen. Manny Diaz, R-Hialeah, said last week in voting against an amendment that would have stripped the provision arming teachers from a broader school safety bill.

Diaz is from a heavily urban part of South Florida where stronger gun control measures are popular. He replaced a term-limited GOP senator who was known for opposing gun rights legislation.

But Diaz voted for the proposal to arm teachers. Diaz pointed to the change of heart that some Parkland commission members had on the issue.

The chairman of the commission — Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri — initially was opposed to giving teachers guns but eventually embraced the concept.

“I want to remind members that we had members of that commission who were totally against any armed personnel being on a campus ... and after their serving on that commission they have come to us with this recommendation,” Diaz said.