

~~CLERK~~ ORDER

I am appearing today in opposition to Senate Bill 442. While I recognize that this is an attempt to clarify issues around "open carry" in schools, it undermines school and community safety in other aspects.

For thirty years I worked in Probation and Parole in Florida and Michigan, the last seventeen years as the Circuit Court Probation Supervisor in Calhoun County. Following my retirement I became the Director of Calhoun Community High School an alternative high school chartered by Kellogg Community College to serve all of the school districts in the Battle Creek area for students who were not finding success in the traditional high school.

I believe that my thirty years in criminal justice and ten years in the educational system allows me to offer a fuller perspective than most people you will hear from.

Currently, schools are places where most students feel safe, away from some of the realities of their lives outside of the school. I used to tell my teachers that our first priority was to establish and maintain an environment in which students could learn. There are, of course, all kinds of distractions, some predictable and others not. Working in an alternative school where students had difficulty focusing and being academically successful, that was even more critical.

The introduction of weapons into a school environment is disruptive to the school and should be minimized to only those situations where a police presence is needed. In answer to gun-related events around the country schools have established protocols and made structural changes to harden against the risk of gun violence.

Right now, other than a uniformed police officer, students and staff are trained to see a weapon as a threat to the safety of the students. It is viewed as abnormal. The intent of this bill seems to be to normalize the presence of guns in the school setting. However it will actually create less clarity—is this a legitimate weapon or an illegitimate weapon. Even if the person is known, it will still draw attention to the person and the weapon rather than keeping the focus on teaching and learning and "doing school."

Frankly, I have difficulty understanding why this law is needed other than to bolster the idea that gun owners have a right to do so. It serves no purpose whatsoever to enhance teaching, learning or safety in the schools and is inconsistent with those goals. There is no guarantee that civilians with concealed permits or openly carrying a weapon will enhance safety. Schools do not want or need parents or interested community members hanging out in or around schools to provide "safety." They are welcome to come in and tutor a student without a gun since a weapon is not a useful tool in the tutoring process.

The reality is that schools are safe places despite the seriousness of the incidents that do occur. The message from the gun owner lobby is that school is a dangerous place, rather than a safe place. The presence of weapons often intensifies confrontations which do occur in a school or community setting, with serious consequences. That is why school administrators work so hard to keep weapons out of schools. I can imagine a scenario in which a student is becoming belligerent with a teacher or principal who is attempting to de-escalate the confrontation when an armed third party decides to intervene in the situation. Inserting a third party in disputes, especially an armed third party, escalates rather than de-escalates conflicts and confrontations. Usually it does not resolve things contrary to some people's preconceptions.

There have always been fights both in school and in the community. The difference in the last thirty years has been the proliferation of guns has made those confrontations more lethal. People get angry. People strike out with what they have at hand. If it is a gun, there are often tragic outcomes.

Finally, a change of this magnitude will require total policy re-writes and new training for school staff. I would encourage the legislature to add funding for those purposes if this action moves forward.

There are legitimate societal interests in keeping guns out of churches, schools, bars, the legislature, courtrooms and other settings by even responsible gun owners. First responders must would have to determine if a person in possession of a gun is part of the problem or part of the solution. That wastes precious time and could have tragic consequences for the gun owner in addition to others.

It is a matter of balancing the individual's rights with the needs of the group, and there is substantial case law that individual rights are not absolute. At a judicial review It is incumbent on the government, or the school in this case, to show how the exercise of the individual right interferes with the legitimate operation and goals of the group. Weapons are disruptive in schools, not a benign "exhibition" of individual rights as is claimed. It serves no other clear purpose. It enhances neither school nor student safety.

Finally, a gun is a tool, useful in some situations, not in others. As the saying goes, "if all you have is a hammer, over time everything begins to look like a nail." At times it seems as if pro-gun advocates fall into this same category—a gun is the answer to all problems of safety. In fact, there are many valuable tools to de-escalate confrontations, and guns are the tool of last resort. Unfortunately, just the presence of a gun, visible or concealed (if known) can escalate and exacerbate the situation in which a gun appears to be the only solution. Schools work hard to teach conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques rather than relying on "we are more powerful than you" solutions.

I would urge this committee **NOT** to move SB 442 forward. I do believe, however, that legislation **IS** needed to clarify the recent mixed court rulings--legislation that will close the "Open Carry" loophole