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David R. Walker
Christoval ISD

Pauline M. Sampson
Stephen F. Austin State University

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Active Shooter Events: The Guardian Plan

David R. Walkerⁱ
Christoval ISD

Pauline M. Sampson
Stephen F. Austin State University

The decision on how to protect the children and youth while at schools is a serious conversation with varying agreements on the best practices. Some feel that school personnel should not be trained nor expected to be able to react to an armed person while others believe that training of school personnel and allowing them to be armed will deter armed assailants in schools. Ultimately, each school board and district leadership need to choose an emergency safety plan that fits their community. The number of school shootings has brought emergency safety discussions to the forefront again. One school district, highlighted in this article, chose the implementation of a plan called the *Guardian Plan*.

Background

Allowing certain employees to be armed on January 30, 2014, Christoval ISD became the second school district in Texas to implement the *Guardian Plan* (Atterbury, 2013; Boardbook, 2013). The mass shootings in Aurora, Colorado and Newtown, Connecticut, (Barron, 2012; Washington Post, 2012) along with the U.S. statistic of 387 school shootings since 1992 (Stop the shootings, 2014) prompted Christoval ISD leadership to consider arming designated personnel in the event of an active shooter event or other emergency situations that posed a direct threat of physical harm. Texas Penal Code 46.03(a)(1) provides school districts the ability to designate persons through written regulations or written authorization to carry guns (Texas Penal Code 46.03).

What to Consider for Arming School Employees?

The priority for making the decision to designate personnel to carry a gun was based on the safety of children and employees. In the event of an active shooter event, it is the duty of the school district to limit as many casualties as possible. The leadership at Christoval ISD felt that the current gun-free school zones utilizing lockdown procedures for armed intruders fell short in stopping the harm and death of multiple innocent lives. Past experiences with active shooter events reveal that when a threat is met with resistance, the situation ends abruptly (Active Shooter Defense Protocol, 2013).

A model was analyzed to examine how civilians can be the resistance should there be an active shooter at Christoval ISD. The Guardian model was chosen because *Guardians* are civilians that possess highly developed skills acquired through specialized training. *Guardians* do not replace

ⁱ **David R. Walker** may be contacted at david.walker@christovalisd.org.

law enforcement (LE) but are able to respond to a situation just as a citizen would if attacked or responding to another citizen in physical harm or danger. With the training that *Guardians* receive, they can act in a densely populated area such as a school that has a high concentration of innocent civilians. Regular Concealed Handgun License classes do not train for those types of scenarios (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2014).

Reasons for Armed Faculty and Staff

The Christoval ISD (CISD) leadership talked with *Guardian*, Supt. David Thweatt from Harrold ISD to determine the school district's reasons for having armed faculty and staff when Harrold ISD became the first school district to arm personnel in Texas on August 15, 2008 (Goodwyn, 2012; McKinley, 2008; Nichols, 2008). Thweatt cited reasons for the *Guardian Program*. First, specially trained faculty and staff in place is a huge deterrent for any would be assailants considering to inflict harm (Schmid, 2014). There are lower incidences of active shooter events in non-gun free zones or in areas that have armed security or uniformed police officers present (Active Shooter Defense Protocol, 2013). Second, there is no wait time of law enforcement for help when school personnel are armed. Many rural areas have wait times for law enforcement of 10 to 30 minutes. This is not acceptable when there is a threat of harm. CISD leadership met with its local law enforcement agency and inquired about the best-case scenario on response time (Schmid, 2014). Additionally, other first responders and Emergency Medical Service personnel will not enter a building until secured by law enforcement. This means that several minutes pass before victims can receive emergency care. Third, there are multiple armed individuals in place to protect children and employees. These individuals have specialized training, and they are as David Thweatt described, "peppered throughout the building like fire extinguishers" (Thweatt, 2013). *Guardians* are present to stop and contain a threat before it can take any more lives. Fourth, armed *Guardians* are anonymous. Except for the board of trustees, key personnel, the *Guardians* themselves, and law enforcement, no one knows how many *Guardians* there are. In addition, the location of the *Guardians* isn't disclosed to the public. This further strengthens the deterrence factor as potential attacker(s) would not know if he/she (they) would be immediately met with a dynamic force or not. An attacker(s) would not know the strength of force he (they) would be met with as opposed to a gun-free zone. This would always keep them guessing. *Guardians* do not stand out but blend in with the other faculty and staff (Schmid, 2014).

Additional Advantages for Guardians

There are additional advantages to having *Guardians*. Budget constraints made it impossible to hire enough school police officers. Local school personnel trained to be *Guardians* receive an annual stipend to supplement the purchase of a firearm, range ammunition for practicing, and defensive ammunition while carrying (Schmid, 2014). Therefore, more trained personnel beside school marshals may be used to protect the students and employees. Districts may only employ one School Marshal per 400 students in average daily attendance (ADA) per campus (TEC 37.0811(a)). Furthermore, *Guardians* may carry a concealed firearm in the presence of students. School Marshals are restricted from carrying concealed firearms if their primary duties: "involve regular, direct contact with students, the marshal may not carry a concealed handgun but may possess a handgun on the physical premises of a school in a locked and secured safe" (TEC 37.0811(d)). Additionally, the Texas Attorney General stated in his October 11, 2013 a legal opinion, "the Guardian Plan gives the school board broader discretion in defining the plan through written regulations; whereas the School Marshal Plan has very specific requirements and

constraints” (Abbott, 2013). Not having a firearm on the employee’s person delays response time or could even restrict the employee from having a chance to intervene in stopping an incident (Active Shooter Defense Protocol, 2013).

Approach Taken for Implementation of the Guardian Plan

The safety and facilities of Christoval ISD were evaluated by the Texas Association of School Administrators. This was followed by an evaluation of the safety plans and devices available at the schools. After these were discussed in executive session, a legal opinion was obtained for a policy on arming personnel. Next, an outside trainer was obtained after a determination of qualifications. A rubric was created and used by the CISD superintendent to screen potential outside trainers. The rubric considered someone: who had extensive knowledge and experience being in multiple gunfights including experiences involving an active shooter event; that was an experienced firearms trainer in the areas of civilian, LE, military, and private security; that had experience in the physical and psychological effects of being in a gunfight; one that used recognized tactics, skills, and techniques in the combat shooting industry; and one that had successful experience as serving as an expert witness and would serve as an expert witness for the *Guardians* and school district if needed in potential litigation following a shooting (Schmid, 2014). The CISD selected Chuck Taylor of *Chuck Taylor’s American Small Arms Academy® (CTASAA®)* to train its *Guardians*. To be in compliance with Texas Penal Code 46.03(a)(1), resolutions and policies were ratified by the board of trustees (Boardbook, 2013). Policy CKC (LOCAL) was approved, which allowed for the designation of certain employees to be armed. In addition, Policy GKA (LOCAL) (now DH (Local) was approved which allows for the possession and display of prohibited weapons as permitted in CKC (LOCAL). In addition, employees that are not “*Guardians*” may possess firearms in their vehicles if properly secured or on school trips in school vehicles as long as students are not riding as passengers unless the employee is authorized under CKC (LOCAL). Lastly, a resolution passed authorizing Trustees at board meetings to be armed at board meetings.

Training for the Guardian Plan

During the first year of the *Guardian Program*, designated faculty and staff underwent five days of initial training and four additional days afterwards for handgun training. Training continues on at least an annual basis with a qualification at the end of the training. In addition to this qualification, at least two other qualification trainings are given during the year to ensure that employees maintain their level of skill. Long guns such as carbines, rifles, and shotguns require additional training days and a qualification for each type of firearm.

The school district pays for the training and the cost of ammunition used during training. *Guardians* are trained to use handguns, carbines, rifles, and shotguns in scenarios involving some of the following: single and multiple targets, bystanders and moving bystanders, small targets or targets at distance, failures to stop, corners and barricades, dynamic entry, vehicles, hostage situations, tactical and speed reloads, and the various types of weapon malfunction clearing. Some of the trained skills and equipment are not disclosed in this article for security reasons. *Guardians* also receive medical orientations so that they can practice lifesaving skills including: critical blood loss, restricted airways, and tension pneumothorax.

Positive Byproducts of the Guardian Plan

As a byproduct to the implementation of the *Guardian Program* three positive outcomes have occurred. There has been heightened law enforcement (LE) presence at our schools. The local sheriff has been supportive of the Guardian program, and this has created an opportunity for the school and the Sheriff's office to enhance the working relationship with one another. Law enforcement are in our schools more and this acts as a deterrence while giving LE a better familiarization with the layout of our facilities. This clearer understanding by LE of the school facilities will allow them to move with more speed and mobility in the event of an active shooter event. Additionally, the LE see our *Guardians* at least twice a week allowing both LE and *Guardians* to be able to identify one another quicker in the event of an emergency. Finally, the relationship between LE and students will break barriers down so that students will be more likely to share information to LE and school officials.

Another positive outcome was that the District and Campuses' Multi-Hazard Emergency Operation Plans were refined and improved. This was due to the lessons learned through various trainings, drills, and working in concert with LE and other first responders and emergency personnel. A most notable impact occurred when District personnel began attending trainings hosted by the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center and its sister organization the Texas School Safety Center (Walker, 2018). Both are located at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. These two organizations collaborate very closely with the *I Love U Guys Foundation*® which developed the Standard Response Protocol™ (SRP™) (and now available the SRP Texas Edition™) and the Standard Reunification Method Version 2™ (SRM™) (I Love U Guys, 2018a; I Love U Guys, 2018b; Texas School Safety Center, 2018a). The SRP™ and SRM™ provide a uniform response for any emergency or incident including an accountability method in which to reunite students with families after an incident (I Love U Guys, 2018a; I Love U Guys, 2018b; Texas School Safety Center, 2018a; Texas School Safety Center, 2018b). Both SRP™ and SRM™ align with NIMS (National Incident Management System) requirements and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) recommendations (I Love U Guys, 2018a; Texas School Safety Center, 2018b). With the use of these protocols, first responders and the school community now all had one common language and one uniform action plan (Walker, 2018).

Lastly, grants for emergency medical trauma gear were acquired and Guardian personnel received training on how to use the trauma gear (Boardbook, 2014). After the initial grant, additional medical trauma gear commonly known as individual first aid kits (IFAK's) were purchased for all classrooms and district vehicles. All district personnel were training in the use of the IFAK's. This training exceeds the training that school personnel receive in basic first-aid and CPR. Training includes the use of tourniquets and wound packing materials for critical blood loss, the use of a nasopharyngeal airway for a restricted airway, and the use of chest seals to prevent sucking chest wounds and tension pneumothorax (Walker, 2015).

Conclusion

The very topic of arming teachers and staff is controversial. However, every school district leadership and community needs to determine how to best protect their students and employees. Teachers act as *In loco parentis* (in place of a parent) while students at schools or under their

supervision at school functions. It should be the right of parents or their designees to be able to defend their children in an event of an armed intruder. In intruder lockdown trainings, faculty and staff are trained to avoid, deny, and defend. In the best case situation, teachers can avoid the situation by moving their children away from the threat. If the threat cannot be avoided, the next step is to deny them access to the children. If the threat cannot be denied access, then it is up to the faculty to defend the children and themselves. Christoval ISD determined that teachers acting as unarmed shields was an unrealistic approach to saving children. Campuses and personnel should have other means of defense that can be used before LE arrives at the crime scene.

The *Guardian Plan* offers one solution that can be employed to stop a threat. It also allows for a great opportunity to build a working relationship with the local law enforcement. It is a deterrent that will hopefully never have to be used in any Texas school district, and if it is used, it will hopefully limit the number of innocent casualties.

The legal opinion given by the Texas Attorney General on October 21, 2013, validates the use of *Guardians* when it reported that a person that is authorized to act as a *Guardian* may possess a concealed firearm at a school board meeting or at a school sporting or interscholastic (UIL) event on school property. The purpose of this article was to give a basic overview of what to consider when looking at a *Guardian Plan* and help school district leadership determine if it fits their emergency safety plan for students, school personnel, and community.

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