



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CAMPUS CRIME , GUNS AND GUN LAWS

Marksmanship in schools - Letter grades and loaded guns

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Largely obscured amidst the coast-to-coast fixation on last month's massacre in Tucson and the subsequent debate over gun restrictions vs. gun rights was the January 4th shooting at an Omaha high school that claimed two lives, including the gunman. Robert Butler, Jr., a student at Millard South High School, was apparently angry after having been lectured and suspended earlier in the day by the assistant principal over a New Year's Day prank on school grounds.

The 17-year-old senior was determined to have the last word, but let his gun do the talking. By the time the gun smoke cleared, Butler had fatally shot Assistant Principal Vicki Kasper, seriously wounded Principal Curtis Case, and taken his own life.

The Omaha shooting also sparked debate over guns. Within a few days of the incident, Nebraska State Sen. Mark Christensen filed legislation that would empower teachers and administrators to carry concealed weapons at school. If you have a kid come in to shoot a teacher ... or other kids, □ explained the lawmaker, it's best to have somebody that can take care of the situation. □

This was not the first initiative of its cockamamie kind. There have been attempts in Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Texas and now, apparently, in Nebraska to pass concealed weapons laws for the faculty.

In August 2008, the local school board in the tiny town of Harrold, Texas, actually voted in a policy that allows teachers to carry concealed firearms in that community's one school, serving grades K12. With a total enrollment of just over 100 students, the strident initiative will likely have little effect except to have made national headlines for the rural hamlet near the northern state border.

Supporters of firearms-for-faculty laws argue that ever since the early 1990s when the U.S. Congress established schools as gun-free zones, an armed assailant, be it a student-insider or a stranger-intruder, would be assured to face little opposition. The belief is that arming teachers and administrators might serve as a powerful deterrent to anyone contemplating a Columbine-style school shooting.

It is hard to imagine, however, that a vengeful student, who is willing to die by police gunfire or by his own hand, will be dissuaded by knowing that the faculty were packing heat. He may even welcome the chance to shoot it out with the principal at high noon in the school cafeteria, and, in the process, the potential for martyrdom among his peers.

More importantly, we want faculty to educate their students, not execute them. For school teachers, especially the ones who are frustrated when dealing with the belligerent bully seated in the back of the classroom, marksmanship should just be about A's and B's, not guns and ammo. Let us not confuse the NEA with the NRA.