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Should teachers be able to bring guns to school?

By Brad Knickerbocker
The Christian Science Monitor

ASHLAND, Ore. — In court documents, she's known as "Jane Doe." Innocuous enough, but the woman behind that pseudonym pushes one of the nation's hottest political buttons: guns and school safety.

What Ms. Doe wants to do is take her Glock 9-mm pistol to the high school in Medford, Ore., where she teaches.

She's licensed to carry a concealed weapon, and she has what many supporters say is a legitimate reason for being armed: a restraining order against her ex-husband based on threats he's allegedly made against her and her children.

But district policy prohibits anyone except a law-enforcement officer from bringing a weapon onto campus. When word got out that she had a concealed-carry permit, administrators reminded her of that policy.

There's the rub: According to state law, "any element relating to firearms and components thereof, including ammunition, is vested solely in the Legislative Assembly."

Backed by gun-rights groups, Doe intends to challenge the school district in state court this week. Meanwhile, throughout the country, lawmakers are filing bills that would make it legal for adult school employees to carry firearms, in some cases providing special weapons-safety training for those who want to be part of their school's security force in addition to their classroom teaching duties.

Gun-rights groups and school boards around the country are paying close attention to the Oregon case.

"There's a specific state statute that prohibits local governments, including school districts, from passing laws or policies prohibiting people from owning or possessing firearms," says James Leuenberger, the Portland lawyer representing the teacher.

"Jane Doe," who agreed to be interviewed by phone on condition of anonymity, says she does not want to be viewed as an "Annie Oakley." Trying to extricate herself from an abusive relationship led her to buy her first gun just a few years ago, she says.

Before that, she had not been a gun-rights activist.

But as a veteran teacher, she says, she has come to believe strongly that having responsible, armed adults on campus could have prevented tragedies such as those at Columbine High School in Colorado and Virginia Tech University.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 37 states have laws specifically banning guns at

schools. In Washington state, the law prohibits teachers from carrying firearms on school property.

In general, administrators, teachers organizations and law-enforcement agencies favor such laws. In the confusion of a school shooting, police officials have said, adding guns to the situation just makes it more dangerous.

The state panel investigating the April 16 shootings by a mentally disturbed student who killed 33 people at Virginia Tech University, the nation's deadliest school shooting, agreed.

"If numerous people had been rushing around with handguns, the possibility of accidental or mistaken shootings would have increased significantly," the panel wrote.

But the NRA and other gun advocates view allowing guns on school property as a safety measure.

In Michigan last week, 16 state lawmakers sponsored legislation allowing teachers, administrators and other school employees to carry concealed weapons on school property. Ohio has a similar bill pending. South Carolina, Alabama and Virginia are among several other states that have considered lifting school-campus gun bans this year, according to Stateline.org, which tracks state issues.

Louisiana lawmakers declined to pass a bill that would have outlawed guns in college dormitories, and legislators in Maine similarly killed a bill that would have given colleges the authority to prohibit guns on campuses.

Anthony Stavros, a member of the Nevada State Board of Regents for higher education and a police captain, has proposed deputizing university employees as reserve officers, trained and qualified to carry weapons. The Iowa Board of Regents is close to allowing campus police to be armed.

But efforts to allow guns in grade schools and high schools tend not to get very far in state legislatures.

So far, just one state — Utah — allows concealed weapons on campus. Utah's law applies to public colleges and universities. The University of Utah opposed the 2004 legislation that allows weapons on campus, but lost in the state supreme court.

For the Oregon high-school teacher who takes her case to court this week, the issue is very personal.

"I have two children in school," she says, "and I would like to think that if something like that ever happened, there would be somebody there to do the right thing to protect my kids."

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