A few days ago, the Senate Judiciary Committee, by a vote of 5-1, recommended passage of Engrossed House Bill 1310, aka the First Armed Responder in Schools bill. Although schools did not ask for this bill or want this bill, the Committee members followed the path set by the House of Representatives and determined that schools needed this bill, as an option, should the “unthinkable” ever happen. The “unthinkable” is a veiled reference to the horrors of a Columbine, Sandy Hook, or even a terrorist attack. The presumption was that a school’s first armed responder would take out the nameless, faceless “bad guy” – the shooter – and perhaps save countless lives by so doing. Perhaps . . . .

The Senate Judiciary Committee members did not alter the language that the House had sent over, in large part because they felt the language was respectful of local control. The bill was designed to be a pilot program under which the boards of up to ten schools could authorize an individual to carry a concealed firearm, provided the individual met certain training requirements. The Superintendent of Public Instruction would develop criteria for the program. As an aside, this administrative oversight was a tall order for a Superintendent and department staff who are trained to focus on the education of students—not on the armed protection of students.

Nevertheless, something happened on the way to the full Senate vote. The nameless, faceless “bad guy” became the troubled 14-year-old who everyone knew since the day he set foot inside the kindergarten classroom. The nameless, faceless “bad guy” became the neighbor who sits in the next pew at church or a family friend going through some personal challenges. The nameless, faceless “bad guy” became a long-time school district employee.

Would a first armed responder be capable of pulling the trigger if the need arose? Could a first armed responder live with the aftermath of a hallway, a cafeteria, or a classroom shootout knowing there is very little control over where or in whom stray bullets will land? Stray bullets that inevitably result when panic and adrenaline meet. Would the presence of a first armed responder enhance the safety and security of students and staff or would the presence be an overwhelming concern given the delicate balance of possibilities and probabilities – of benefits and risks?

Engrossed House Bill 1310 was one option for addressing the “unthinkable.” The education groups worked hard to convince Senators that it was not, however, a viable option in a school setting. Aside from emotional arguments and concerns about the very workability of the legislation, there was the perception that school personnel, even if willing and trained, should not be expanding their education functions to take on law enforcement.

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roles. Engrossed House Bill 1310 was ultimately defeated. But, it left in its wake two lingering questions. First, if not first armed responders, then what? Secondly, where does the concept of local control fit into decision making about the safety and security of students and school staff?

With very few exceptions, there is no one on this earth more concerned about the safety and security of a student than that student’s parent. Following closely behind are teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members. But, there is a chasm between being concerned about safety and security and being prepared to deal with the myriad of situations that could jeopardize such safety and security.

As the school year winds down, and nonrenewals and negotiations are completed, it would be a good time for boards to review all of their safety and security protocols. Are they up to date? Do they address not only the “unthinkable,” but also restraining orders; violent behavior, whether by students, staff, or patrons; student

altercations; playground injuries; and medical emergencies, both on school grounds and in school buses? Are evacuation drills appropriate not only for a fire in a school building or a tornado but also for events such as train derailments involving oil tankers or products such as anhydrous ammonia? Are multiple individuals capable of directing and controlling responses so that in the event of one person’s absence, injury, or incapacitation, others can step into the role?

Regardless of the calamity, emergency responders will no doubt do everything they can to arrive in the shortest possible time. Whether a district is large or small, urban or rural, the staff needs to be able to manage the situation and do everything necessary to ensure the best of all possible outcomes until help arrives. This is accomplished through thoughtful preparation—not spontaneity.

The safety and security of students and staff is one of the most serious obligations placed on school board members, and as overseers of the district, school board members are arguably in the best position to work with their staff and community members, articulate their challenges, and together develop appropriate responses or identify the resources they believe are necessary for the safety and security of all who enter their schools.

As part of an overall safety and security package, some boards might very well be asked to consider the use of a first armed responder in schools. Although the concept was defeated this time, it is not likely to go away. In fact, given the ever growing support for concealed carry, constitutional carry, and the ability to defend oneself at any time and in any place, boards would be well advised to take this opportunity and familiarize themselves and their patrons with the multiple complexities that are a part of this issue.

Should there be public discourse, boards might want to ensure that all school staff, parents, interested patrons, and local law enforcement officials have the opportunity for input. That input needs to identify expected competency standards and physical and mental requirements, identify the manner and frequency of demonstrating such, and address responsibility for the cost of ongoing practice and training. That input should also identify all insurance costs and potential liability issues and it should include a thorough focus on all associated risks and benefits. Having a first armed responder in a school is not as simple as merely passing a motion authorizing a teacher to carry a concealed firearm.

As legislators were told, there are certain vulnerabilities that come with living in the more remote parts of this state. Whether those vulnerabilities would be decreased, neutralized, or increased by the presence of a first armed responder will need to be debated—thoroughly and vigorously. If school boards ensure that they, school staff, parents, and patrons have access to factual information and multiple perspectives, they will be in the best position to make the right decision for their district. That is the ultimate in local control.

Maddock School District
Contact person: Tiffany Smith, Bus. Mgr. Address: PO Box 398, Maddock, ND 58348
Phone: 701-438-2531
Email: tiffany.smith@k12.nd.us
Deadline: May 31, 2017
Part-time; may be full-time with teaching duties
Position begins: July 1, 2017

Eight Mile School District
Trenton, North Dakota
Contact person: Janae Reynen, Bus. Mgr. Phone: 701-774-8221
Email: janae.reynen@k12.nd.us
Deadline: May 1, 2017, or until filled
Position begins: July 1, 2017
Application: www.eight-mile.k12.nd.us
or Facebook@trentonschool

Burke Central School District
Lignite, North Dakota
Superintendent & Elementary Principal
Contact: Julie Kreklau, Business Manager
Phone: 701-933-2821
Email: julie.kreklau@k12.nd.us
Deadline: open until filled
Position begins: July 1, 2017
Baesler Approves New North Dakota Math, English Standards

State Superintendent Kirsten Baesler signed and approved the new math and English standards presented to her from the teacher standards writing committees last month. The new standards are ready for North Dakota teachers and students to use in classrooms this fall.

The new standards will replace the math and English standards based on the Common Core that have been in effect since 2011. They take effect during the 2017-18 school year.

The standards provide guideposts for what students should know and be able to do during each grade in their educational journey. For example, North Dakota’s first-grade English standards include introductions to subject-verb agreement and singular and plural nouns; a fourth-grade math standard says students should be able to classify geometric shapes.

“I really feel like we were given the opportunity to really make them North Dakota standards,” said Lynn Mitzel, a member of the math standards writing committee. Mitzel is a math coach for the Fargo public schools and the South East Education Cooperative of Fargo.

Teachers who worked on the math standards writing committee said they believed the new standards were easier to understand and interpret. The standards include examples of how they can be applied in the classroom. Two separate groups of North Dakota math and English teachers created the standards. They began their work in June 2016 and continued throughout the summer, fall and winter.

“Our North Dakota teachers devoted hundreds of hours to write these new standards and this publication is the result of months of conscientious work by North Dakota educators who represented various areas of expertise, including general education, special education, early childhood education, and higher education,” Baesler said.

“When I announced the new standards work would begin, I emphasized the writing job would be in the hands of North Dakota teachers,” Baesler continued. “There were no dictates from the state or federal government. Department of Public Instruction staff provided support and served as facilitators, but they did not suggest or encourage any standards.”

Thirty-eight North Dakota mathematics teachers made up the standards writing committee for math, while 33 English instructors wrote the English standards. “Our North Dakota teachers worked with the former standards for six years, and no one was more qualified to improve them,” Baesler said.

The writing committee’s two drafts were made available for public comment in September 2016 and January 2017, which generated useful opinions from teachers, administrators, and parents.

A second layer of review was also added. A panel of eight community leaders, business people, and representatives of the general public met twice to review the drafts and provide a fresh set of eyes and different perspectives for the committee’s work.

“The whole process was open to the public the whole time. They had the outside group review the drafts of the standards, and they also had the drafts available for public comment. Everything was very up front,” said Patsy Schlosser, an Edgeley High School math teacher and member of the math standards writing committee.

Baesler called the standards-writing process “exceptionally open and transparent.”

“The result is an example of the best in North Dakota education: North Dakota teachers writing North Dakota standards for North Dakota students in an open, transparent, and responsible manner,” Baesler said. “These hardworking professionals deserve thanks from all of us.”

The math and English standards will be posted on the NDDPI website at www.nd.gov/dpi.
Governor Doug Burgum and State School Superintendent Kirsten Baesler recently presented a Department of Public Instruction education innovation award to Simle Middle School teacher Ryan Townsend’s science students.

The students have been developing a solar-powered station for recharging mobile phones and electronics, which they hope to place on park grounds. The project has already won a North Dakota state prize from Samsung Electronics America, Inc., a supplier of mobile phones, televisions, laptops, and other consumer electronics gear.

Townsend teaches two sections of STEAM classes (science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics) at Simle. The two classes have a total of about 50 students. They use a “project-based learning” approach, in which students learn elements of a number of disciplines while working on a specific project.

As part of their project, the Simle students consulted several experts, including electricians, an engineer, and an astronomer. The astronomer told them of the need to place the station’s solar panel in an open space, facing south, at angles needed to capture the optimum amount of sunlight.

The Governor called the effort “an excellent example of how teachers can spark interest in science and engineering by encouraging real-world applications of technology.”

“By pursuing the project beyond the classroom, students are gaining valuable knowledge of civics, logistics, and other subjects,” Burgum said. “Congratulations to Mr. Townsend and his talented students on this well-deserved award.”

Baesler said the Legislature’s approval of SB2186, a bill designed to make it easier for schools to offer innovative learning opportunities, could encourage more learning projects similar to the one being done in Townsend’s class. Governor Burgum signed the bill on April 3 and it takes effect August 1, 2017.