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# Arming administrators in Alabama schools: what you need to know

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A woman prays in the grass outside the Alamo Gym where parents wait to reunite with their kids following a shooting at Santa Fe High School Friday, May 18, 2018 in

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Santa Fe (Michael Ciaglio / Houston Chronicle)



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**By Trisha Powell Crain, [tcrain@al.com](mailto:tcrain@al.com)**

How much time it takes for law enforcement to reach some of Alabama's schools was a key factor in Gov. Kay Ivey creating a program allowing administrators to be armed and use lethal force if an armed intruder threatens students or others on a school campus.

"If you don't have someone there to respond to an active shooter," Ivey's Education Policy Advisor Nick Moore said, "you're a sitting duck."

Reaction to Ivey's creation of the Alabama Sentry Program was all over the map as expected, and people still have a lot of questions.

The program will serve as a bridge until a school resource officer can be placed in each of Alabama's more than 1,300 schools, Ivey said during a press conference about the program.

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Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey's Education Policy Advisor Nick Moore speaks to superintendents about the SAFE Council at an April 18, 2018, meeting in Montgomery, Ala.

Much is still unknown about the program, and school superintendents are expecting more information on the program later this week from Alabama Superintendent Eric Mackey.

To gain a better understanding of just what is already known, Moore and Ivey Press Secretary Daniel Sparkman answered questions about the program in an interview with

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We present that interview in a question-and-answer format below. Some answers are taken directly from the memo authorizing the program and previous reporting.



## Where did the Alabama Sentry Program idea come from?

Moore said the Sentry program came out of the work being done since March 6, when Ivey announced her Smart on Safety initiative and the Securing Alabama's Facilities of Education, or SAFE Council was created. The SAFE Council was charged with making recommendations by April 30 to improve safety in Alabama's schools. Five state agency chiefs were named members of the Council.

But the idea of arming school officials was not addressed in the SAFE Council's ten recommendations, released on May 7.

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That didn't mean it wasn't on Ivey's mind, though. Since 1

~~March 6, Moore said, research conducted by the Governor's~~  
 office revealed that law enforcement response time to schools was a serious concern.

"When the Governor saw the response time issue, that was a compelling factor," Moore said, in the creation of the program.

"Even if the police are two miles down the road," he said, "they're probably not going to get there in enough time to prevent the loss of life."

The rural nature and geography surrounding many of Alabama's schools also fed into the thinking, he said. Nearly 600 of Alabama's 1,300-plus schools are classified as rural by federal standards.



Moore said this was not a quick or easy decision and it wasn't made for political gain.

"This is a solemn, tough thing to do," Moore said. "It's not something we're excited about."

### Why create the program now? What's the hurry?

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"[Ivey] knew that we had to do this because it was in the best interest of the kids," Moore said. "It probably was not in the best interest of the [June 5 primary] election, but putting that aside, it was still the right thing to do."

Moore said there wouldn't be enough time to get any additional school safety measures in place before the start of the next school year if Ivey didn't use executive power to create the Program. There were no guarantees that lawmakers would act on any measures, Moore said, even if a special session was called.

Ivey acknowledged time was of the essence in remarks during a May 30 press conference. "Now is the time to act and that is exactly what I am doing today," Ivey said at the Capitol with Mackey and Alabama Law Enforcement Agency Secretary Hal Taylor.

Though multiple bills were filed during the legislative session that ended March 25, the only action lawmakers took on school safety was to allow money earmarked for technology to be spent on school security.



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## How many Alabama schools are eligible to have a Sentry?

Only schools without school resource officers are eligible and right now, nobody knows what that number is. Moore said they are finalizing the count now but will not release those numbers to the public.

According to federal civil rights data from 2014, the most recent year data are available, 33 school systems in Alabama had no sworn law enforcement officers in any of their schools. That same data, now four years old, showed 730 of Alabama's 1,300-plus schools had no law enforcement officers on campus.

That number is likely off the mark, though, as many communities have added SROs since the tragic shooting deaths of 17 students and faculty at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day.

## Who is eligible to become a Sentry?

In schools without an SRO, only school administrators with a valid school administrator certificate can be considered, according to [the memo](#). In addition, the administrator must have a valid concealed-carry permit, and pass a drug screening, a mental-health assessment, and a stress test. Ultimately, the Sentry will become a reserve deputy sheriff

without the power to arrest anyone.

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## How does an administrator become a Sentry?





The details are still being worked out between ALEA and the state department of education, Moore said.

Moore said the voluntary process begins with a principal asking for approval from the local superintendent. The superintendent and board of education will have to approve the principal's request to move forward with the process.

Simultaneously, the county's sheriff will begin the vetting process to ensure the principal can be sworn in as a reserve deputy sheriff.

Sentries must undergo annual training and recertification requirements.

### **How will communities know if their school's administrator has become a Sentry?**

They won't, Moore said. There are "compelling safety reasons" to keep this information from the public, he said.

"If you do let [the community] know, then you automatically make [the Sentry] a target," he said. In addition, if some school administrators within a school



district become Sentries but not others, Moore said, it could put pressure on others to participate who may not be comfortable with becoming a Sentry.

Communities exercise their voice through their elected officials, he said, which in all cases include the sheriff, and in some cases include the superintendent and the board of education. Those officials are empowered to make public safety decisions, he said, and will be trusted with the final decision.



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## Who will pay for training, guns and other requirements of the program?

Agencies that are members of the SAFE Council will pay for the trainings, he said. Members of the Council include ALEA and the ALSDE, along with the Departments of Mental Health, Information Technology, and the Community

College System.

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The memo specifies "local boards of education shall be responsible for acquiring and maintaining a weapons-storage system, an approved weapon, ammunition,



accessories, and the ALEA-designed bullet-proof vest." Specifications pertaining to each of those items have not yet been worked out but will be developed by regional School Safety Training and Compliance Teams. The vest will be designed by ALEA.

Moore said ALEA and the ALSDE are still working to determine which sources of a school's revenue stream and income can be used to purchase firearms, adding, "We'll find ways to make sure Sentries are prepared to exercise their duties."

### **Will a Sentry be allowed to carry the gun on the school campus?**

Only in the event of an active shooter situation. Otherwise, the gun must be locked up.

Ivey's memo specifies sentries "will train to maintain an authorized weapon in a biometrically-secured safe fastened to the school's physical plant."



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With respect to the safe, Moore said they have not talked with any vendor about purchasing biometric safes. Using a biometric safe was based on the idea that you need to have a secure way to open the safe, he said.

"It could be a fingerprint or a retina or iris scan," he said.

"That is something that will be determined by ALEA and the state department and is probably something that will never be known publicly."

### **When can a Sentry open the safe and use the gun?**

"Their actions as a law enforcement officer are only triggered when there is an active shooter," Moore said, adding that administrators are the ones to declare a code red emergency in response to an armed intruder or active shooter situation.

### **How will law enforcement who respond to the active shooter know the Sentry isn't the bad guy?**

Ivey's memo specifies that a specially-designed bullet-proof vest must be worn by the Sentry and the regional School Safety Training and Compliance Team is responsible for making sure law enforcement know what the vest looks like.

### **Can a Sentry be sued?**

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Moore said sentries have "double sovereign immunity."

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Sentries will have immunity both as reserve deputy sheriffs and as school administrators. That doesn't prevent a lawsuit being filed, of course, but the Sentry would have to



be proven, in simple terms, to be negligent and well outside of their scope of authority to face liability for whatever actions they took as a Sentry.



## Do other states allow school officials to be armed or have access to guns on school campuses?

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 18 states have a state-level law allowing anyone with permission from the school authority to carry a gun on a school campus: Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, New Jersey, New York, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Utah and Vermont.

An additional seven states specifically allow school employees to have a gun on K-12 school grounds: Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota, Tennessee and

Wyoming.

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Four of those 25 states (Missouri, Tennessee, Texas and South Dakota) require school employees to complete training programs.



It is unclear how many schools and districts actually have armed school officials or others on campus, though.

Franklin County in northwest Alabama has had a program authorizing trained and vetted school employees and community volunteers to carry a gun on campus since 2013.

Moore was clear that Alabama's program was not designed to model any other state's law or program.

"This program is designed specifically for Alabama," Moore said, "using data from Alabama, and looking at the needs of Alabamians."



Moore said Alabama's program is the most conservative of the ones he's aware of. "If you look and compare our program to others," he said, "we have the most measured, thoughtful program out there because it is limited to

~~administrators, and collaborations between law~~

~~enforcement and school officials are required.~~

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Texas has had one voluntary program in place for nearly a decade, and added a second program with training requirements, in 2013. Though Santa Fe High School, where the May 18 shooting occurred, and 10 students and teachers were killed, had opted in to the state's Marshal program, no one had been trained to serve as a Marshal. Two armed SROs were on campus, though, and were key in ending the shooter's rampage.

A school board in northern Georgia just last week approved a program allowing teachers to carry holstered weapons.

### **What reaction has Ivey received in response to announcing the program?**

Moore said the reactions have been largely predictable and reflect biases the person had prior to the announcement of the program. In other words, if a person though guns in schools was a bad idea prior to Wednesday's announcement, the person's reaction reflected that line of thinking.

It comes down to this, Moore said: will a school have someone there to respond or not? Less harm is likely is there is someone there to respond, he said.

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Moore said he knows that arming administrators isn't the preferred way to keep students safe.

"Optimally, would we rather [the armed person on a campus] be an SRO? Sure." Moore said.

"When you're having to make a utilitarian decision for the greatest good for the greatest number," he said, political arguments against having an armed, trained and properly-vetted administrator "don't hold much water."

## What's next in the Council's efforts to improve school safety?

Moore said they will know more about estimated costs of implementing some of the SAFE Council's recommendations by June 15. Those recommendations include placing a dedicated and trained SRO on every school campus, enhancing school building security,

installing and linking school surveillance equipment to local law enforcement and expanding school-based mental health services.

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Ivey also gave the Council a June 15 deadline to give her a timeline for implementing the other six recommendations. Those recommendations include creating threat assessment teams at the school and district level, creating an app to report threats anonymously to school officials, tracking school-based incidents in real time, enforcing current law requiring Code Red drills, and creating 11 regional school safety training compliance teams that will provide training to K-12 schools.



Ivey set all of that in motion on May 16 when she asked for more information from the SAFE Council.

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