

Florida governor signs bill allowing more armed teachers

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Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis had previously made it clear he supports the changes made to the law enacted after a rifle-toting former student walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and killed 17 people in February 2018.

The bill expands the “guardian” program that allows school districts to approve school employees and teachers with a role outside the classroom, such as a coach, to carry guns. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel via AP)

Florida, Tallahassee: More Florida teachers will be eligible to carry guns in the classroom under a bill Republican Governor Ron DeSantis signed Wednesday that immediately implements recommendations from a commission formed after a mass shooting at a high school in Parkland.

DeSantis signed the bill in private and didn't issue a statement afterward. But he previously made it clear he supports the changes made to the law enacted after a rifle-toting former student walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and killed 17 people in February 2018.

“We did a lot for public safety,” DeSantis said immediately after the legislative session ended Saturday. “The Marjory Stoneman Douglas bill, people had disagreements on, but ultimately I think we're going to be safer.”

The bill was one of the most contentious of the legislative session that ended Saturday. It expands the “guardian” program that allows school districts to approve school employees and teachers with a role outside the classroom, such as a coach, to carry guns. School districts have to approve and teachers have to volunteer. They then go through police-like training with a sheriff's office and undergo a psychiatric evaluation and a background check.

The new law expands the program to make all teachers eligible regardless of whether they have a non-classroom role.

Democrats spent hours arguing against the bill, saying it could lead to accidental shootings, or that a teacher could panic and fire during a confrontation with students. Republicans emphasised that the program is voluntary, and that law enforcement in some rural districts could be 15 minutes or more away from a school if a shooter attacks.

Broward County, where the Parkland shooting took place, has rejected the program.

“Florida lawmakers claim they passed this bill for the victims and survivors of the shooting at Parkland, but they have ignored many concerns for student safety,” said Sari Kaufman, a Parkland survivor and a volunteer with the Florida chapter of Students Demand Action for Gun Sense in America.

Her statement added: “Now, I'm scared for the next generation of students who will grow up afraid of gun violence in their schools; not just from a shooter, but from the guns that could be carried by their teachers.”

David Hogg, another Parkland survivor, said he was not surprised by the new law and said that it will be up to residents to convince their local school boards to opt out.

“We need the parents and students to show up at school board meetings and say this is not OK, and this doesn't make us safer, and we're not comfortable with this,” Hogg said. “And if you choose to vote for

this, we will not be voting for you come the next school board election.â€•

March For Our Lives said in a statement Wednesday evening that the bill was a mistake and that DeSantis, â€œhas further jeopardized the lives of every student in Florida. Our schools and teachers donâ€™t need more guns.â€•

The measure also contains a number of other school safety measures, such as wider disclosure of certain student mental health records and mental screening of troubled students. It also mandates greater reporting of school safety and student discipline incidents and a requirement that law enforcement officials be consulted about any threats.

â€œThis legislation continues efforts to proactively enhance coordination between education, law enforcement, and community mental health resources to ensure at-risk students receive the help they need before a tragedy occurs,â€• said Republican President Galvano in a news release.

He added that the measure will help school districts implement new security and school hardening provisions from legislation passed last year to â€œprevent those who would seek to harm our children from gaining access to our schools.â€•

Nikolas Cruz, 20, is charged with the Parkland killings. His lawyers say he would plead guilty if guaranteed a life sentence, but prosecutors want to seek the death penalty.

Cruz spent several years in and out of schools for children with emotional and behavioral problems, but attended Stoneman Douglas before being kicked out about a year before the attack.

- AP