

# **Handling violent students requires calm, preparedness**

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Our office receives numerous calls every year from teachers who are unsure of how to handle dangerous and violent students in their classrooms. In response, we have developed some general guidelines to help ensure your safety and the safety of other students in the classroom.

First, make sure you aren't in any way instigating the assault. Avoid any type of physical intervention with a student unless absolutely necessary to protect yourself or others from serious bodily harm. Never physically intervene to protect property, yours or the district's, from a student's violent outburst – simply get the other students out of the area.

Additionally, avoid grabbing things like pencils, pens or paper wads away from a student; don't stand in the student's way to prevent them from leaving; and keep a comfortable distance between you and your students at all times, respecting their personal space. Above all, avoid even a light touch when you are angry or agitated. A student will often interpret a light touch as an aggressive act if accompanied by a raised voice or angry look.

Second, if you are assaulted by a junior high or high school student, call the police. It is a crime and shouldn't be overlooked – even for special education students.

Granted, if a student is autistic or severely disabled to the point that the assault was not intentional, no charges can be pursued. However, if the student knows right from wrong and intentionally attacked you, call the police. If you don't call first, there is a good chance that the student or the student's parent will call the police and accuse you of assault.

If you are assaulted by an elementary age student, whether or not the police will respond depends on the facts of the case, the severity of the assault, and the student's mental state. Be aware that many jurisdictions will not charge or prosecute elementary age students.

Third, if you are dealing with a student who you believe is likely to present a danger to you or other students, interact with your principal and staff to develop a building response plan. Arrange for other staff members to respond if you are in trouble, plan out interventions that will help avoid violent behavior, and work on a disciplinary progression designed to protect yourself and your students.

Additionally, especially for students with a history of sexual offenses, make arrangements with your staff so the student is monitored closely throughout the day. Try to make sure the student is never left unattended.

Finally, if your administration is not cooperative and directs you to interact with a dangerous student without any support or training, draft a letter to the district stating your concerns objectively. An OEA advocate can assist you so you avoid using any emotion-laden language. The letter should simply put the district on notice of the danger posed to you and your students and should request interventions on behalf of the district to provide a safe working and learning environment.

If the above steps don't help to resolve the problem, contact your OEA Advocate Specialist. We can often work with staff members and even resistant administrators to find other solutions in even the most extreme cases.