

# When students attack

*By Heath Merchen  
Associate General Counsel*

Consider these two scenarios:

1) You've just had a student slug you in the face – you're shocked, injured, angry, scared and very possibly about to take another blow. No one is calling the office; there isn't another adult in sight.

2) You come upon a crowd of students yelling and screaming at something going on in the center of the group. You push through and find two students, both of whom outweigh you, fighting violently.

These are not far fetched hypotheticals – they are realistic examples of some of the more volatile situations faced in Oklahoma schools. Unfortunately, there is little or no training in most teacher programs regarding how to respond to student violence and often no help to be found at the building level. In hopes of offering some assistance, this article provides some general guidelines to follow when faced with student violence.

**First, call 911.** If you are assaulted by a junior high or high school student, call the police and notify your building administrator. If you fail to report the assault immediately, the student may call to report you first and you will be the one that ends up getting criminally charged. Telling your administrator gives him or her the opportunity to impose discipline and ensures he or she isn't surprised when a squad car pulls up in front of the building.

**Second, defend yourself, but don't go overboard.** When attacked, you have the right to use reasonable force, which means the force necessary to overcome the attack. However, it does not include the right to beat the snot out of the student once he retreats or lets up. Sadly, most staff members don't know how to effectively defend themselves which is why obtaining some type of restraint or martial arts training is important. The purpose is not to make you the deadliest teacher in the world – but instead, to learn to effectively respond to an attack while maintaining emotional control so you don't either curl up in a fetal position crying or inflict serious injuries after losing your temper.

**Third, keep records.** For instance, if a special education student is repeatedly assaulting you as a result of his disability and causing injury, report each instance as a worker's compensation claim. This creates a record of the frequency and severity of each injury and puts the district on notice that you are continually in danger. In addition, in the special education context, ask the district to convene an IEP meeting to address strategies and placement issues, bringing the injury documentation with you.

**Fourth, intervene immediately.** If you see a fight between students, never walk away. If you aren't comfortable physically intervening, then intervene by yelling loudly or blowing a whistle and dispersing the crowd around the students. Send a student you trust

to get an administrator. If one of the students is in serious danger, you may need to physically intervene even if you aren't comfortable doing so, as your first concern must be the safety of the students under your care. If you are worried about having to physically intervene, then get training in how to restrain a student so that you are prepared to respond.

**Fifth, be present.** The most important step in preventing student violence is staff presence; stand in the doorway during passing times so that you can see what is going on and so students know you are watching; if you see a confrontation developing between students or students and a staff member, go towards it immediately. You want to be the type of staff member who is rushing to address the problem rather than one who is rushing away to avoid it. The higher the number of staff who go towards the problem, the easier it will be to prevent or resolve.

It's important to remember that there is no fail-safe way to protect yourself from liability or injury when students get violent. However, if you keep student safety as your first priority and follow these guidelines, it will help. If you have additional questions or concerns about specific student violence issues, be sure to contact your regional advocacy specialist.