

**Stopping Fights in School: One of Education's Dark Little Secrets**

Imagine having to perform a dangerous job, on an almost daily basis, where you can be seriously and permanently injured. Add to that, you were never told what to do or trained to perform that job by your supervisors. In addition, if you made a mistake, you would be held responsible. Sound unbelievable? Yet this is exactly what happens in most U.S. schools on a daily basis. Teachers are expected to protect students, ensure their safety and stop fights without any training or directions. Over the past 20 years, I have been teaching school violence prevention programs to teachers and other school personnel. In an unofficial survey involving hundreds of educators, over 98% of those surveyed said they were never given any training in fight intervention in their college courses, by their school districts or their teacher's union. To make the job that much more impossible, when dealing with violent students, teachers are frequently told they are not supposed to touch anyone. During a presentation I was giving to a group of school administrators several years ago, I asked them who in your school breaks up the fights. The answer given was "whoever is there." "Were they trained?" I asked. The answer to that was an emphatic "No." This approach is a prescription for disaster and a major safety hazard that exists in most public schools. Why don't you hear anyone i.e. school boards, state education departments, teacher's unions etc., addressing this issue?

Why Are Fights So Risky and Dangerous to Stop? First, fights create tremendous emotional stress on the both the fighters and the teachers coming to intervene. Under stress, performance changes dramatically. Thinking and logic often cease to exist and our decisions become more emotional and unconscious. The fighters often can't tell the difference between their opponent and an innocent teacher intervening to protect them. The strength of fighters, even little ones, increases dramatically. Even relatively small people have tremendous uncontrolled power. Throw in the presence of weapons or controlled substances and the situation becomes that much more dangerous. Under stress, the maternal, paternal or caring adult mindset might take over and influence the educator to physically intervene at the wrong time. The second stage of most fights is the most dangerous time to intervene but because of the brutality of it, teachers often get

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drawn in to protect one of the combatants. Aside from not being properly trained to intervene, often the teacher is not physically fit or might have health issues i.e. high blood pressure, heart condition etc. that could result in serious injuries. Fights are governed by only one law, "Murphy's Law." Therefore, even individuals properly trained run some risk of injury. Fight intervention is a team effort and therefore team training is required. At the very least, two trained individuals are required to work as a team to safely intervene. Finally, since physical skills are perishable, frequent review and training is needed to maintain these skills.

I have worked as an educator for 33 years, trained in the martial arts for over 40 years and I have been a defensive tactics consultant for the law enforcement community for over 20 years. So I know how the professionals would deal with these physical situations. The educational community expects teachers to perform this difficult and dangerous job of fight intervention without any of the tools or training other violence professionals would use. In many school fights only those professionally trained can safely physically break up a fight. The only other option available is to use verbal intervention or just wait until the students get physically exhausted and stop. Unfortunately, in the latter case, students are exposed to being seriously injured. To my knowledge, very few schools have an adequate number of trained professionals on hand to stop a fight.

In spite of some stories that appear in the newspapers, the real world is not aware of the dangerous children teachers have to contend with. Many of these children are quite young. Here is a classic but true story of what can happen and how the educational establishment handled it. In a Philadelphia elementary school, while students cheered, 2 students started to fight, overturning desks as they lunged toward each other. The young school teacher, not much bigger than the kids herself, frantically called the principal's office for help and got no response. One of the students fighting, a 10-year-old girl, threatened to punch the teacher in the face, and then grabbed a pair of scissors from the teacher's desk and threatened to stab the other student, a 10-year-old boy, in the face. Miraculously, order was restored. The teacher followed district instructions and filed two reports on the fight, including details of the threats and scissors. However, the principal

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delayed filing the report for six days and then neglected to mention the threats or the scissors. In Philadelphia now, strict district policy requires full reporting of all violent incidents. Yet, the principal risked his / her job by failing to mention in their report either the threats to the teacher or the scissors in their report. The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires schools, districts and states to keep track of safety statistics. This makes it riskier for anyone in the schools to be less than honest or timely when it comes to reporting violent incidents. (Story reported in the Principal's Legal Alert July 2003) Yet concealing fights and violence continues to occur daily in public schools, another well kept little secret. Another story appearing in Education Week's "News in Brief" section some time ago described a fight in a suburban Chicago district middle school involving 6 girls. Apparently, the teachers and principal couldn't stop it and the principal instructed an aid to call the police. To insure that the police responded quickly, the principal told the aid to say, "There is a gun." When the police arrived and no gun was present, they charged the principal with disorderly conduct. Additionally, the district is reviewing the case for possible further action against the principal. In my opinion, the only thing the principal is guilty of is her concern for the safety of her children.

With an increasing number of disrespectful and potentially violent children in public schools, a better system for fight intervention must be implemented. Because teachers will be the most likely ones on the scene for any problem, they must be trained to recognize, prevent and defuse violent behavior. The need for school violence prevention training for teachers should be "shouted from the mountaintops," but it isn't. On the other hand, I don't believe the vast majority of teachers can ever be expected to physically break up a fight. A team of trained professionals must be on hand to intervene when needed. Discussions with the local police departments could enable school officials to establish such a team. Overweight, out of shape and untrained security guards won't be acceptable either. For schools, while this might be the cheapest solution, it only increases the possibility of students or security guards being injured and it is not fair to either. Plus, lawsuits will surely follow. How many students or teachers must be injured before the educational community wakes up? How many lawsuits will it take? According to the School Principal's Legal Alert, the average lawsuit costs a district

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\$250,000. A fraction of that amount of money can buy plenty of quality training.

Whether it is non-physical fight intervention training, bullying, hazing, or child abuse, teachers must be better trained to recognize covert violence, and prevent and de-escalate potentially violent situations before they blow up. School safety training must be looked at as an investment and not an expense. I often hear educational leaders say “It’s for the kids.” Well let’s make the schools a safer place, “It’s for the kids and teachers too.”

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