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About the cover:

Police and school security officers have become an integral part of many schools. Here Chicago policeman Howard Kilroy is surrounded by children outside Kosciuszko Elementary School. Photo copyright © 1989, the Times Mirror Company.

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BY JERRY GLENN

*How to deal with student fights
and other acts of violence has become
a major concern for school employees today.*

Training teachers for troubled times

Students in both urban and rural areas often resort to fighting to resolve conflicts, and many of them are wielding weapons during those fights. A recently released Texas A&M University study of 1,000 rural eighth- and 10th-grade public school students in Central Texas found that half of the boys and 20 percent of the girls had been involved in at least one fight with a weapon during the past year. A fifth of the students even said that they thought carrying weapons was one major way to prevent fights. (See article on page 22.)

Similar results were uncovered in the 1987 National Adolescent Student Health Survey, which found that almost half of the boys (49 percent) and about one-fourth of the girls (28 percent) reported having been in at least one fight during the past year where physical blows were exchanged or weapons were involved in an attack. The study was of 11,000 eighth- and 10th-grade students in 200 public and private schools nationwide.

What educators can do

Understandably, crime and violence have become a topic of concern in the schools and with the public. Many teachers complain that they didn't learn how to handle violent or disruptive

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students in their college education classes. This is a difficult skill to learn on the job, and educators must put this concern in perspective by dealing with behavioral and criminal incidents in a professional and practical manner. The most common classroom conflicts involve students who are out of control and fighting.

Such behavior can escalate into criminal incidents if not handled properly. Even with the most professional response by teachers and administrators, the possibility always exists that police will need to be called for assistance. Teachers and administrators alike need to understand district and police department procedures for when and how to request such assistance.

A clear understanding also must be made among students, faculty and administration regarding student behavior and the consequences for misbehavior and criminal acts. Every school should have a clearly communicated behavior code so that students understand the expectations and the consequences for violations. Many school districts have policies requiring spectator students to leave a fight scene, and the failure to immediately disperse may result in disciplinary action. Following up every fight by appropriately punishing the assailant can be an effective deterrent.

Posters placed around campus, articles in the principal's newsletter and school

newspaper, and meetings of the Parent Teacher Student Association, booster clubs and community service organizations provide excellent avenues to detail expectations for student behavior and the consequences for misbehavior and criminal acts. It also helps to have campus rules posted in each classroom and to provide regular weekly reminders concerning expected student behavior during the announcements. These announcements can be made in a positive manner, stressing to the students that safety is important.

The thrust of these efforts is to provide a safe and secure environment for learning. By promoting safety, administrators can gain the support of the community and school staff. Their combined influence on students should result in a greater acceptance and understanding of school rules and the discipline policy. Additionally, the faculty and administration must support each other to promote a school climate that does not tolerate misbehavior.

Conflicts in the classroom

Here are a few practical suggestions for dealing with an angry student in the classroom who is defying your authority and is out of control:

- Do not raise your voice.
- Try to remain calm and rational.
- Do not touch an agitated or angry student.

- Try to keep the student seated. In many instances, this is impossible. You can only suggest the student remain seated so that he might explain to you what is wrong.
- Be reassuring to the student as well as the rest of the class. Explain the importance of protecting every student's right to learn. Talk about options for resolving the conflict.
- Send another student for help. The student should be told to go to the nearest office to summon assistance from the administration.
- After the incident is over, immediately document everything that happened. This documentation should include time, name(s) of student(s) involved, a brief description of the events that occurred, and any information that pertains to the student(s) or the incident. This report should be submitted to the administration. You also should keep a copy in case of a future conference with parents or school administrators regarding the incident.

Breaking up a fight

Teachers and administrators need to know some general guidelines for breaking up a fight between students either in the classroom or on campus. Most fights can be stopped by using a very stern, loud voice and demanding that the fight stop immediately. However, this does not always work, and such a situation can be greatly intensified if not handled properly. A school security officer or other trained individual should be summoned to separate the combatants when verbal efforts to stop the fight fail.

Great caution should be used in attempting to physically break up a fight. One or more of the students could have a concealed weapon, and what appears to be a melee with arms and fists flying could escalate into a potentially fatal situation involving guns and knives.

Avoid heroics, including force. Negotiation and persuasion are the best survival tools against a weapon-wielding assailant. Never hesitate to bring in a

specially trained school peace officer or law enforcement support to intervene. Remember that these resources are available and should be called upon whenever necessary.

Law enforcement officials can be a valuable resource before a problem erupts as well. They can give specific suggestions and provide instruction to school faculty and staff about dealing with student conflicts. The primary objective of any school staff member who is faced with students fighting should be to ensure the safety of other students and get them out of the area, then confine the conflict to the smallest area and the smallest number of participants.

Here are a few tips that may be of some value when coupled with common sense and a high level of confidence:

- If the fight has not yet started, reach the site as quickly as you can while letting the students know that you are heading toward them. Use a very loud, authoritative voice as you approach and tell the students to break it up and go to class.
- If the fight has started, *walk* to the location while observing the fight and surrounding area for other possible problems. Be aware of the areas on either side as you approach. At times, students will run in from the side to join the fight.
- Tell the students who are fighting to "Break it up. Stop right there. Everyone back off. Move away from each other, now!" You represent authority, and most students have been trained to respond to authority. Most of the time, this verbal response will stop the fight.
- Unless you have had specific training, it is not advisable to physically restrain students who are fighting. When emotions are running high, having knowledge and skills, as well as confidence in your voice, will help resolve the situation quickly and without further incident.
- Be sure to document the fight as soon as possible after order is restored.

This documentation should include time, location, names of students if you know them, descriptions of those involved if you do not have names, and a narrative about the fight.

Ensuring staff safety

Another concern both teachers and staff members often have voiced centers around the issue of personal safety. "What can I do to protect myself from being a victim of campus violence and crime?" "How do I make myself less vulnerable to would-be assailants?"

The key element is to avoid solitude and isolation. You are most vulnerable when you are alone. It is a good idea to make it a rule to travel in numbers whenever possible, especially upon arriving before the opening of school and leaving after dismissal. This warning against solitude also includes lunch periods as well as time spent in faculty lounges and in classroom preparation. These forms of isolation can be very dangerous. The idea is to reduce vulnerability by denying a criminal the privacy he needs to operate.

Any type of disturbance on a school campus should be handled as an opportunity for creating an even more positive school climate. Communication with staff, students and the community is the key to maintaining such a climate. Discussions at faculty/staff meetings about behavior and crime are important. Administrators must feel comfortable about discussing school safety topics with parents, students and the general business community. The school staff needs the confidence of knowing that these matters are openly discussed and that guidelines and procedures are in place for emergencies of this type.

Everyone must work together to keep our schools safe. Model curriculum standards, the state framework, and improved instructional strategies are vital to school reform. For these factors to be in place and working, a safe, secure school environment is the first essential element. □