

Breaking Up a Fight In Your School

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On occasion, an argument between students can quickly escalate into a physical confrontation. As a teacher, it is important that you understand some basic safety tips to de-escalate the situation while keeping yourself out of harm's way.



Know your school. Familiarize yourself with the layout of your school – inside and out. All schools have numerous blind corners, long hallways, segregated classrooms and isolated areas (such as boiler rooms, custodial closets, theatre prop rooms and locker rooms). You never want to get caught in an area where you don't have a way out!

Focus on hot spots. Be aware of areas where students could obtain weapons within the school – knives in the kitchen, sports equipment in the locker rooms, potentially dangerous chemicals in the science lab, pool chemical room and custodial closets. Your own classroom may have numerous sharp or blunt objects that could be used as weapons against you. Always remember to lock or secure all rooms when they are not occupied by a school staff member.

Never expect respect. Just because you are a principal or teacher, never assume that all students will respect your position of authority. Coming upon a potentially hostile situation may be all that is needed for a student to 'throw one last punch' or in a worst case scenario – attack the teacher. Never let your guard down, even for a second.

When arriving upon the scene of a fight between students, quickly review the situation. Ask yourself: what has happened? Who and how many students are involved? Is there anyone around who can assist you? How physically imposing are the students, and what will likely happen next?

Never let your guard down. The age, sex, physical size or status of a student should not be considered when dealing with a physically confrontational situation. A small female student may attack a much larger male teacher when emotions are involved. Conversely, a small female teacher may face little chance of control against a much larger male athlete.

Always try to maintain a safe distance between the student and yourself. Never get caught in a closed classroom, in a corner, or any other area with limited means of escape. If you can't handle the situation, 'get your knees to the breeze' and get out of there.

How physically imposing are the students, and what will likely happen next?

Attempt to remove the confrontational students as quickly as possible. Engaging in a verbal sparring match in front of other students may simply 'add fuel to the fire' and escalate the situation. If your presence threatens to demean a student in front of their peers, the student may feel trapped and stand up to you. Instead, remove the student from the situation as fast as you can. Aggressiveness tends to diminish when the student is alone and there is not a crowd involved.

Quickly scan the area to see if there are weapons present. Past history has shown that metal detectors are not full proof. Additionally, clothing trends of today, allows students to easily hide weapons on their body, as well in book bags, purses and athletic bags. When confronting students, always keep your eyes moving for weapons.



Keep your eyes on the group. When removing a student from the classroom, a fight or any other confrontation, always be aware of the group dynamics that may be developing around you. Watch for the warning signs that other students may become involved by 'defending' the student you are confronting. This may entail a verbal or physical confrontation with another student or a distraction plan to 'rescue' their fellow student.

Don't wait too long to get help. A small problem may turn in to a large confrontation if you wait too long to get assistance from other adults. There is strength in numbers. More teachers or the assistance of other respected students may help to calm a situation before it gets out of control. Know who the key individuals are who can 'talk down' a situation.

Give specific commands to the students in a loud stern voice. Sometimes students are hoping a teacher will tell them to stop fighting so they have a 'graceful' exit from the situation. Make sure that you identify yourself by name and call students by their name.

Never get between students who are fighting. If the situation does result in punches being thrown – direct the students to stop fighting – defer to your school's rules prohibiting fighting, not your personal authority. Your goal is to separate the aggressor and the victim as quickly as possible.

If you decide to get between students who are fighting, remove your eye glasses if possible. Additionally, a teacher wearing dangling ear rings, necklaces or scarves may be asking for trouble if they attempt to break up a student fight.



Dismiss the audience. Inform the onlookers that they must immediately leave the area. Call students by name and specifically tell them where they have to go. For example, saying "Mike, go back to your class now!" is more effective than simply saying "Everyone get out of here now!" Make mental notes of the names of the onlookers – you may need to talk to them later once things have settled down.

Once the confrontation is over, support the victims in any way. Get medical attention if necessary. Provide protection, support and counseling for the victims if needed. Don't forget to clearly document the incident and debrief relevant teachers - your school's administration will need accurate information to provide to law enforcement and involved parents.



I hope this information has been of assistance to you in providing relevant information regarding 'breaking up a fight in your school.' If you would like additional information on this topic, please contact Ted Hayes, Senior Risk Manager of M3 Insurance Solutions at ted.hayes@m3ins.com, extension 5517.

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