

OEA CURRENT ISSUES NEWSLETTER

OAKLAND EDUCATION
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CALIFORNIA TEACHERS

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Why Teachers Don't Feel Safe in School

As you know, your OEA Bargaining Team has made an extensive proposal to incorporate additional safety and security language in the collective bargaining agreement. The following, recent experience of a substitute teacher at one of the high schools demonstrates most eloquently why we are demanding the inclusion of the new language.

"Bitch"

A substitute teacher was assigned to teach a high school class in a portable. She told the students that she didn't want them to answer the phone in the portable. Sure enough, the phone rang and a female student jumped out of her seat and grabbed the phone. The teacher approached the student, held out her hand for the student to surrender the phone. Instead of cooperating, the student craned her head away, keeping the handset as far away from the teacher as possible, thus deliberately disobeying the teacher a second time. It is not hard to imagine the feelings this flagrant disregard for directions created in this substitute teacher. Here was a student deliberately defying her and keeping her from her only means of communicating with the rest of the school. What was going to happen next? Who was the student talking to? The teacher finally took the phone from the student. The student then punched the teacher on the arm, glared at her and said, "Bitch."

As soon as this happened, several other students began writing up their accounts of events, while taunting the teacher with, "We'll see that you never work again, bitch."

The School Administration Supported the Teacher. Nah.

In a one-on-one meeting and in a phone call with the principal, the principal implied more than once that the teacher's behavior justified the student's behavior and that the teacher could not be trusted to recount events accurately. The principal told the teacher, "Your version of the events is disputed." Really! It is that students wouldn't back up the teacher's version, since students in this dis-

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OEA/CTA/NEA, SHEILA QUINTANA, PRESIDENT

obvious students wouldn't back up the teacher's version, since students in this district have learned that all they need is two or more students to trump a teacher's account. They also have learned over the years that making an allegation against a teacher often gets the teacher put on administrative leave with pay, although, since Dennis Chaconas became superintendent, that practice has been mitigated.

So the principal told the teacher that when she took the phone from the student, "You made the first aggressive move." The principal also stated that the teacher holding her hand out was not a clear enough indication that the teacher wanted the student to give her the phone. At least the principal recognized that the student had answered the phone (against the expressed direction of the teacher) and that the student did not surrender the phone willingly, which was an insubordinate act. But, gosh, the students had a different view, so the teacher must be chastised. Besides, it was only a substitute and it is so much more convenient to sacrifice the teacher than tell parents that their little darlings are tearing up a classroom and defying the legitimate directions of a substitute teacher.

Good Student

The principal did report that the student admitted to using terrible language, but denied hitting the teacher. If a student had called a teacher a bad name and hit her, to which would the student admit? The principal never did say what sanction was applied, but did say that it was a good student. The substitute should be so relieved.

So a good student gets a pass, when engaging in dangerous, assaultive behavior. How many times do we have to read in the papers about some tragic occurrence in school perpetrated by a student no one would suspect of doing something terrible, before we realize that all students need to learn civic responsibility and civil behavior?

The Central Administration Supported the Teacher. Nah.

Since the site administration did not support the teacher and apparently made its decision by counting who was on which side, the teacher sent a letter to the principal and copied it to administration and a person in labor explaining what happened and seeking support. The person in central administration who received the letter commented, "Her (the teacher's) message seems to be dripping with theatrics and exaggeration." The person went on further to say, "I'm having a hard time equating this to being 'assaulted and battered.'"

One wonders what he does equate this to. A valentine or holiday card? What kind of an objective investigation will this central administration person conduct, if the person is so quick to dismiss the teacher's request for support. "Dripping with theatrics and exaggeration" indeed. To whom does one turn in this school district, when students threaten and batter teachers or other students?

What is the Message?

When a student is allowed to engage in assaultive verbal and physical behavior and is not held to account, the message sent to the marginal student is that inappropriate behavior is accepted and excused. Soon, more and more students realize that it is not required that they learn appropriate social control. They learn that adults in the schools have no more credibility than an individual student. If dangerous behavior is not dealt with immediately and firmly, dangerous behavior will become more and more the norm.

Teacher's Credibility

For anyone who has substituted, you know how substitutes approach each day. They don't get up and say how can I get into a conflict with a student, today. They just want to do their job and discharge their duties with as little stress as possible. No substitute is going to pursue an allegation, if it is not true. There is enough stress in substitute teachers' lives without artificially trumping up serious charges against a student. In addition to reporting to the principal and central administration, this substitute teacher filed a complaint with the Oakland Police Department. She knows the officer's name and she has the case number. At least the police will be doing an investigation and the prosecutor's office will then make a decision whether or not to file charges. The student at least will learn from her contact with the police that the teacher she struck was not a patsy and was not afraid to call a foul.

What's Next? Where do you Stand?

Your Bargaining Team has made a very extensive safety and security proposal to the district's bargaining team. The district has basically dismissed the concern and made an insulting response. **It is time for you to step forward and let your Bargaining Team know where you stand on this issue. Are you going to let the district blow off the need for strict standards of behavior in our schools or are you going to add your individual support to Bargaining Team?**

On the back of this publication is a survey that asks if you have first-hand knowledge of egregious student behavior toward a teacher, student or other adult in the schools that was dismissed or discounted by those responsible for supporting teachers in their efforts to maintain a suitable, safe learning environment.

Please take the time to fill out the survey and return it to the OEA Bargaining Team. Remember, OEA is back in its permanent location at 272 East 12th Street, 94606, or you can send in your response through school mail.

To: OEA Bargaining Team

Re: Safety and Security in our Schools

Name _____ Home Phone _____
(Please Print)

Work Site _____ School Phone _____

I experienced/witnessed verbal or physical assaultive behavior by a student toward a teacher/student/adult that was not sufficiently dealt with by administration.

What I experienced/witnessed _____

The consequence for the above was _____

Site Where Incident Occurred _____

Administrator Involved _____

When Did Incident Occur _____

Teacher Involved _____

These details will be kept confidential, but it is important that the Bargaining Team have specific information so it can speak at the bargaining table about incidences with authority. Knowing that their colleagues trust them with such information gives the Bargaining Team added confidence to insist that new safety and security language be added to the collective bargaining agreement.

Return to OEA immediately through school mail or US Mail to 272 East 12th St., 94606, or fax to 763-6354.