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Sun Follow-Up

Attack on city teacher highlights training gaps

Educators lack skills to defuse clashes, some say

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The grainy cell-phone video of a student hitting Baltimore art teacher Jolita Berry in her classroom, replayed in the national news and on the Internet, has reinforced the wide concern among school safety experts that teachers often don't receive enough training in how to defuse potentially dangerous confrontations with students. Berry's case has angered local officials, who said they would hold a meeting to try to find ways to give teachers skills to deal with disruptive students.

Baltimore schools offer classes on how to deal with such situations, but they are voluntary and are only available to a small number of teachers. Those who study school violence say that kind of instruction is crucial. "An essential part of new-teacher training has to be about how to de-escalate conflict," said Jane Sundius at the Open Society Institute, a nonprofit that has studied school suspensions and funded programs to improve student behavior.

Yesterday, while Berry was in New York being interviewed on CNN and the Today show about the attack last week by a 10th-grade girl, U.S. Rep. Elijah E. Cummings said that he would join state schools Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick in hosting a meeting on strategies to reduce school violence.

"We will be working to provide students with anger management resources they need and to provide teachers with the necessary tools to ensure that their classrooms are safe," Cummings said in a statement.

Minutes after the plans for the meeting were announced, a student and city school teacher at Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High School on Hillen Road were taken to Union Memorial Hospital, authorities said. .

While the community response to school violence is often to clamp down with more school metal detectors and harsher punishments, in reality, teachers and students will be safer if they learn to deal with confrontations themselves, experts say.

"Rather than confront the child, learn to move the child away from their peers," said April Lewis, director of safe and supportive schools in Baltimore. Students are often embarrassed in front of their peers and become more confrontational with a teacher because they don't want to be seen as backing down, Lewis said.

The attack occurred after Berry asked the student to take a seat. The girl refused and walked up to her. "She said [she was] gonna bang me," Berry said. "I said, 'Back up, you are in my space. If you hit me, I'm gonna defend myself.'"

Berry said the principal told her that she had used "trigger words" that made the incident worse.

"Teachers need to sharpen their observation skills to notice when trouble is brewing," said Rick Phillips, executive director of Community Matters, a California nonprofit hired by schools to help reduce violence. "They need to know how to intervene effectively."

When he was a teacher, Phillips said, his training didn't teach him to stand at the door of his classroom and check in with students daily on how their lives were going, but that is an essential part of keeping schools safe. "I don't think our teacher training has caught up with this problem."

Baltimore schools held a series of teacher workshops on Saturdays beginning last fall to train them in avoiding power struggles with students, dealing with kids in crisis and mentoring boys.

But a small percentage of the teaching force has taken part in that training, which is voluntary, according to Mary Minter. She said they are now trying to train teachers in 30 middle schools.

Berry, the teacher who was attacked, joined the staff at Reginald Lewis last December. She maintains that she had good training and good mentoring from an experienced teacher, but it didn't help her.

"These students are so unpredictable and so nothing really prepares you for that," she said.

There were about 500 assaults on teachers and staff at Baltimore schools last year, although they represent a variety of incidents. For instance, students will be disciplined if a teacher is inadvertently touched while intervening to break up a fight.

Phillips said it isn't just the behavior of the teachers that can de-escalate a situation, but what students do as well. In this case, the rest of the class apparently watched the fight and did not intervene. One student reported the fight to the office, but others encouraged the girl to "hit her," according to Berry.

Community Matters tries to take school leaders -- good and bad -- and teach them how to maintain a safe environment.

"We have understood that you can't legislate compassion or kindness. You can empower the influential leaders to speak up and other students will follow the modeling of those kids," Phillips said.

In that environment, other students could have physically tried to stop the fight, or they could have told the girl to stop and reminded her what trouble she would get into if she hit the teacher.

Another view was that the community needs to get involved in helping support the children whose behavior is linked to family problems, said Anne-Marie Bond, assistant director for the social work community outreach service at the University of Maryland Baltimore.

"These issues are well beyond the school per se. They reflect other layers in the community and experiences students have," Bond said, adding, "It is hard for the school to address this without a more community-wide or city-wide approach."

Much can be done to improve the counseling and mentoring in schools," she maintains. Reginald Lewis,

for instance, doesn't have mental health counseling, although it has dealt with many students from troubled families.

"The kids in the community experience a lot of trauma in their daily lives that are associated with poverty, addiction, street violence," Bond said.

The student who allegedly assaulted Berry was suspended, but the school system has not said what will happen to her. She could face an expulsion or transfer to another school or criminal charges from the teacher.

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