

JCTA to teachers: Call police if threatened

ALLISON ROSS

@ALLISONROSS

Responding to what it says has been growing teacher concern about dangerous situations in their classrooms, the county's teachers union has sent out a letter to members from its attorneys saying that teachers "have the right to call 911 and ask for police assistance if



Brent
McKim

under attack or injured by the assault of a student." The newsletter, which is titled "Attacked at School," says teachers "must be assertive about their rights to be protected in assault situations, to counter the natural tendency of principals and the district to not involve law enforcement, and often the media."

The article is apparently part one of two written by the attorneys representing JCTA and its members. Part two of the letter will be released next Wednesday.

The newsletter tells teachers to follow district policies and handle the situation first with the school principal, but said that "in emergency situations, or where the principal has demonstrated a disregard for teacher protection," teachers can reach out to police on their own.

Brent McKim, president of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, said the article is an update of a similar one JCTA sent out a few years ago that similarly advised teachers of their rights.

He said the union was prompted to send out this updated advisory after getting requests from school building representatives asking for this information.

"Our sense is this is a deteriorating situation as far as the student behavior our members are encountering and the lack of support from administrators," McKim said.

He said teachers are often getting blamed or scolded for not managing behavior instead of getting the help they need.

JCPS spokeswoman Bonnie Hackbarth said Wednesday afternoon that JCPS Superintendent Donna Hargens had not received a copy of the JCTA letter and was now reviewing it. Hackbarth released a statement saying that the district is "on the same page" with

JCTA when it comes to teacher safety.

"It is never acceptable for a teacher to be threatened, hit, pushed, or attacked by a student," Hackbarth said. She said JCPS provides professional development in classroom management and de-escalation techniques and said JCPS has a code of conduct everyone must follow.

"When a student does behave in an unsafe manner or attacks a teacher, JCPS fully supports and assists teachers who determine to press criminal charges against that student," Hackbarth said in the statement. "We also train principals and other administrators to contact police when their intervention is necessary to control a situation."

McKim said JCTA has been reaching out to Jefferson County Public Schools for months about significant concerns with student behavior problems in schools.

In June, JCTA released results of a survey taken by just under 1,100 teachers in the district.

That survey reported that 47 percent of respondents said student misbehavior affects their ability to teach most of the time or always. Two-thirds of respondents, when asked how often school administrators assist as needed with dealing with behavior in the classroom, responded "sometimes," "rarely" or "never."

In a recent op-ed published in the Courier-Journal, Hargens said the district takes safety in school seriously and pointed to a district survey that found that 92 percent of teachers felt safe and secure in their schools.

But McKim said that some teachers don't feel comfortable answering district surveys truthfully, saying he's heard from some teachers that feel the survey is not actually anonymous.

McKim said JCTA has scheduled a meeting with Hargens to discuss the union's survey results and look at solutions. He said it has taken months to get the meeting scheduled because "we feel the district has just been ignoring us or blowing us off."

JCPS spokeswoman Hackbarth disputed that characterization, saying that Hargens meets regularly with JCTA representatives.

Reporter Allison Ross can be reached at (502) 582-4241. Follow the Courier-Journal's education team on Facebook at Facebook.com/SchooledCJ