

# When Students Assault Teachers, Effects Can Be Lasting



Teacher Michelle Andrews says she was assaulted by a student in 2015. She ended up pressing charges, was fired, and then settled with the school board for nearly \$200,000.

—Daryl Peveto for Education Week

By [Madeline Will](#)

When Michelle Andrews leaned over to talk to a disruptive 6th grader in her class, she says the student struck her in the face, causing Andrews' neck to snap backwards.

The 2015 incident was scary, and it also caused permanent nerve damage, said Andrews, who had been teaching for six years before the attack. The student was suspended for a week for disrespect toward a teacher—not for assault—and then returned to Andrews’ classroom in Bridgeton, N.J.

When Andrews asked her principal to permanently remove the student from her classroom, she says the principal told her to “put on her big girl panties and deal with it.” Instead, Andrews decided to press charges against the student—a move that she alleges led to her termination from the Bridgeton school district. Andrews sued the school board, claiming she had not been adequately protected after being injured, among other allegations.

She ended up settling for \$197,500, but the incident left her shaken and depressed.

“I didn’t know if I even wanted to go back into teaching after all that,” she said. “I felt like I couldn’t trust the system, I couldn’t trust my administrators. I was afraid if something like this happened again, how I would react—fight or flight.”

(For the school district’s part, Superintendent Thomasina Jones said the settlement was reached on the advice of the insurance company, and the district conducts a thorough investigation into every incident of violent student behavior.)

What happened to Andrews isn’t an isolated incident. In the 2015-16 school year, 5.8 percent of the nation’s 3.8 million teachers were physically attacked by a student. Almost 10 percent were threatened with injury, according to federal education data.

Some teachers, like Andrews, may sue after they are attacked, and those lawsuits typically become high-profile news. But for the most part, teacher

victimization has been an understudied and underpublicized area, experts say.

“It’s a tough thing to study,” said Dorothy Espelage, a professor of psychology at the University of Florida. “No one wants to talk about that teaching is a hazardous profession, that teachers are at risk when they’re in the classroom.”

While special educators are more frequently at risk because they work with children who might have severe behavioral issues, teachers of all subjects, of all grade levels, and from all types of schools are at risk for violence, Espelage said.

New research offers some insights on the teachers who are being attacked, and what those incidents can mean long term.

A recent study by Francis Huang, an assistant professor in the statistics, measurement, and evaluation in education program at the University of Missouri, analyzed 2011-12 federal education data to see what factors lead to teacher victimization. The analysis excluded special education teachers.

**[The study, published last year](#)**, found that female teachers were more likely to be attacked than male teachers. Teachers in schools with higher percentages of non-white students and higher levels of poverty were more likely to report being threatened or attacked—but Huang said the data didn’t



Michelle Andrews continues to teach; she now works at a private alternative school in New Jersey.

—Daryl Peveto for Education Week

shed any light on the demographics of the students who attack teachers.

In addition, new teachers were more likely than experienced teachers to be threatened or attacked, the research showed.

Being attacked by a student can have serious consequences for teachers, said Byongook Moon, a professor in the criminal justice department at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Moon has received two grants over the last couple years from the National Institute of Justice to research teacher victimization.

Almost 44 percent of teachers who had been the victims of physical assault said the attacks had a negative impact on their job performance, according to a study Moon conducted of 1,600 teachers. Nearly 30 percent said they could no longer trust the student, and 27 percent said they thought of quitting their teaching career afterwards.

## **Student Consequences**

In recent years, state legislators across the country have shown interest in reducing teacher victimization. However, bills proposed in the area have at times aimed to increase punitive measures toward students—a tack that rarely receives unified support among the education community.

For example, [\*\*a bill currently going through the Wisconsin legislature\*\*](#), deemed the Teacher Protection Act, would, among other things, allow teachers to remove a student from their classroom for a maximum of two days. Generally, school administrators decide whether to suspend students, but the bill would let teachers ask the school board to suspend students who attacked them, if administrators deny their request. The bill would also require police to report violent incidents by students off-campus to their schools.

The bill's author, Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt, is a Republican who chairs the Wisconsin State Assembly's education committee and was a teacher for more than two decades. He said he proposed the bill after seeing local media reports of teachers being assaulted and hearing that schools were reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions.

When students don't have consequences, he said in an interview, they're "being put in control of the classroom. ... We're putting teachers in the midst of a social justice experiment."

Critics of the legislation have said that it could contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for students with disabilities, students of color, and students who have already experienced trauma.

"Wisconsin suspends black students at higher rates than any other state in the country," state Rep. Chris Taylor, a Democrat, [wrote in an essay](#), adding that this bill would be "devastating" for those students.

And while critics worry that the bill will cause teachers to treat students differently if they know their arrest records, Thiesfeldt said that provision is necessary to ensure teacher safety.

"It's unfair to stick a teacher in a situation where you have a child in the classroom who was arrested for a violent misdemeanor in the past 24 to 48 hours, and all of a sudden, that child is right before you in the classroom, and you have no idea—it's unfair," Thiesfeldt said. Even so, he will consider amendments to the bill to make sure students with special needs aren't unduly punished.

Other bills that proposed harsher punishment for students who assaulted teachers have not been successful: In North Carolina, [a bill proposed in 2015](#) would have made students 16 and older guilty of a felony if they

assaulted a teacher. The bill was opposed by children’s advocacy and disability rights groups.

“Branding a young person as a felon decreases their chances of continuing education and employment opportunities and increases their chances of eventually spending time in state custody,” wrote two advisors of Youth Justice North Carolina (which is now called the Youth Justice Project), [in a 2015 blog post opposing the bill](#).

And in Minnesota, [a bill introduced in 2016](#) would have required school boards to automatically expel a student who threatened or inflicted bodily harm on a teacher for up to a year. There have been multiple incidents of attacks against Minnesota teachers in the past few years—including [a 2015 incident in St. Paul](#) in which a high school student slammed a teacher into a concrete wall and then began to strangle him. The teacher ended up with a traumatic brain injury.

Still, the bill received fierce opposition from educators and was stopped in committee. Instead, the state teachers’ union, Education Minnesota, is putting its energy toward promoting restorative practices to handle student discipline. [Restorative practice is an increasingly popular approach in schools](#) that says students need to take responsibility for their actions and work to right a wrong, rather than be punished under “zero-tolerance” policies.

“Restorative practice, in its simplest form, [says that] hurt people hurt people,” said Becky McCammon, the restorative practice program coordinator for the St. Paul Federation of Teachers and the St. Paul district, which has committed to piloting this work in a maximum of 12 schools over three years.

In one elementary school, she said, this means that when a student’s

emotions begin to run high, he or she can go to the school's "green room" to take a break and de-escalate the budding conflict—there's a place to do yoga, a punching bag, and a school leader who's trained in restorative practice to talk to.

Meanwhile, in one of the district's high schools this year, a student who was in the midst of a mental-health crisis physically harmed some educators. Afterwards, the educators met with the union president, school leaders, and members from the community to discuss what happened and how that kind of incident could be prevented in the future, McCammon said.

## **Sending a Signal**

Researchers say that legislation might not be the best place to start to tackle the problem of teacher victimization. Instead, they say, teacher training and administrative support are key.

"Mainstream teachers rarely get training on how to de-escalate violence in the classroom," said Espelage, the University of Florida professor. "Some of the training we give to special ed. teachers, I think we need to give to all teachers."

She said there are simple tactics that a teacher can use to reduce the possibility of violence, from managing her tone and demeanor toward a student to understanding trauma.

Huang's study also found that teachers who feel supported by their administrators and think that their colleagues enforce the rules consistently are less likely to be victims of threats or attacks.

"If a teacher feels like the administrator has his or her back, this might send a signal—teachers might feel more protected, cared for, and enabled by the



school administration,” said the University of Missouri professor. “The students who victimize teachers might think, ‘Oh, I can’t get away with this.’ It might be a deterrent.”

On the flip side, if teachers and students see that a principal won’t back up a teacher when a student misbehaves, “that might weaken the teacher and it might embolden the student at the same time,” Huang said.

These days, Andrews, the N.J. teacher who was attacked, teaches in a private alternative school where she works with students who have behavioral issues.

“I love where I’m teaching because, for once, I’m in a school where there’s definitive rules in place, there’s support from everyone I work with, support from my administrators,” she said. “I feel safer in my classroom now.”

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