

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Former deans decry Madison school violence

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Cathy Accardi was one of two deans at Madison Memorial High School in 2016 when she stepped in to break up a fight between two sophomore girls.

“I wish I would have kept walking back to the office and let security handle it,” she says.

But the former special education teacher and student engagement coordinator decided to intervene.

“Two assistant principals were backing off, so I stepped in,” Accardi says. “One of the girls stopped throwing punches, but the other wouldn’t stop whaling at me.”

The fracas resulted in spinal injuries to Accardi. She hasn’t worked as dean since the incident and is receiving disability. She says the pain is constant.

Accardi says the girl who stopped punching received a one-day suspension, and the girl who pounded her received a four-day suspension and was referred to special ed.

The Madison School District’s new discipline policies were rolled out in the 2014-2015 school year. The School Board was unhappy with a disproportionate level of suspensions imposed on students of color, especially African-Americans.

“We could not keep excluding students from school,” School Board member Dean Loumos says. “We can’t give up on these kids.”

The question is if the new discipline code is doing more harm than good. The goal was to be more patient with troublemakers, but the stories of violence are ugly.

Former Memorial High School Dean and seven-year Athletic Director Tim Richie says the rollout of the new discipline policy was confusing. Media coverage and word of mouth about the discipline policy led some students to tell him, “You can’t suspend us anymore.”

That was never true. But Richie says it was part of the initial confusion. He was at odds with the administration.

“We had a kid shouting obscenities in classrooms and pounding on doors,” Richie says. “I tried to suspend him, and a district staff attorney said I should have let him go because he said I escalated the situation.”

Richie says he learned not to intervene into intense student fights for his own protection. Richie had previously taught physical education at Jefferson Middle School in Madison for 18 years.

“I didn’t become a teacher to deal with violence,” he says.

District officials say they can’t discuss specific incidents. But Behavior Education Coordinator Quinn Craugh says the district has five levels of student interventions and reprimands. He and Loumos say the district has zero tolerance for violence. Craugh says Level 1 could be mouthing off in class. Level 2 could be grabbing a student’s arm and laughing. Level 5 could be student violence that leads to an expulsion hearing.

Loumos says it is important to identify the root causes of a student’s more severe behavior. Craugh says repeat behavioral problems often lead to greater attempts to work with the family as part of an intervention. That doesn’t always work.

“Home is sometimes the worst place for some kids to be,” Loumos says. “We really need to work with them in the building.”

But Accardi says some students have no desire to learn or behave better.

“We might put a student into in-school suspension for getting high on marijuana,” she says. “The other dean or I were supposed to give that student 75 minutes of work that a trainer from Chicago taught us. What? The in-school dispatch never stops.”

She says she was constantly being summoned away to deal with more bad behavior.

“The disciplined student might get a good nap,” she laments.

Now the district is reviewing whether to keep Madison police officers in each high school. Loumos says some students freak out when they see an armed officer.

“Maybe we can spend the money on more social workers,” he says.

In addition to one cop at each high school, Madison middle and high schools have 26 full-time security assistants, including four at Memorial, six at East, six at La Follette and five at West.

Last Tuesday, a student cut his hand on broken glass during a fight at La Follette and was taken to the hospital to be checked. Two security assistants were kicked in a fracas with students at Memorial Feb. 5, according to a security source.

“Sometimes we need three security assistants for one student,” Accardi says.

The head of security for Madison schools, Joe Balles, believes the police officers are an asset. He was a police officer at La Follette in the ‘90s, and said officers bring the school community closer.

He’s right. After the Florida school shooting, parents need all the comfort they can get.

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