

Opinion

Editorial: Attacks on teachers need to be reviewed

Posted 04/23/19 at 6:15 AM

Injury claims rise at Sarasota schools

A startling rise in workers' compensation claims by Sarasota County teachers and staff — too many linked to physical encounters with students — demands attention from the School Board and administrators.



Schools Superintendent Todd Bowden's personnel decisions were cited by leaders of the teachers union as a possible link to the rise in claims. [Herald-Tribune staff photo / Dan Wagner]

The numbers were the focus of an advertisement, purchased by the Sarasota Classified/Teachers Association, published in Sunday's Herald-Tribune. Citing statistics provided by the school district's Risk Management Department, the ad states that 149 workers' compensation claims have been filed during this school year. That number compares with the following claims in each of the previous five academic years: 88, 55, 40, 79 and 62.

According to supplementary information that details the causes of injuries and the school's location, there have been incidents of teachers and aides being bitten, kicked, pushed and punched by students. Although one school, which is dedicated to "special needs" students, generated a disproportionate number of incidents, the district's conventional elementary, middle and high schools have contributed significantly to the problem.

Leaders of the SC/TA note that the numbers reflect only incidents that are reported (they said many are not reported), and not surprisingly drew a link between the rise in claims to 149 from 55 and the superintendency and personnel decisions of Todd Bowden.

Whatever the cause, the increase warrants an open-minded assessment.

Three of the five School Board members have staunchly defended Bowden, but they and the superintendent's two critics on the board should be asking the underlying question — What explains the spike in claims? — and requiring answers.

Are teachers and aides adequately trained in de-escalation tactics? Are they able to defend themselves within reason? Are the district's student-behavior policies and enforcement of those rules adequate to protect both adults and children? Are teachers and aides receiving the administrative support they deserve and need?

And, yes, are cultural factors — lack of respect and effective discipline at home — at play?

The School Board and its administrators have an obligation to protect employees — especially those in the classroom — as well as students. If the reported behavior of students is not addressed and mitigated, the school district's efforts to attract and retain high-quality teachers will be undermined.

Affordable housing proposal

As part of a settlement related to Sarasota's Community Redevelopment Agency, city and county governments will together invest an additional \$1.5 million in affordable housing.

Both governments intend to create a special fund and a new joint initiative. A staff proposal could be delivered to the City Commission in May.

This is a commendable effort. In light of the demand and the high price of providing housing, any initiative should be cost-effective and sustainable.

Here's a question: Rather than create a new program, would it be possible and advisable to channel that money toward an existing provider that has shown its ability to offer affordable housing at multiple price points? That would be the Sarasota Housing Authority, which is currently developing housing — with public and private-sector funds — aimed at entry-level police, firefighters, teachers and others.

Just asking.