

Safety in the Classroom
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Each year teachers and teacher aides sustain hundreds of injuries. The unfortunate fact is most, if not all of the injuries, are avoidable. Further, these incidences often prevent teachers and/or teacher aides from being able to perform their jobs. The problem becomes perhaps still more pronounced, moreover, when instructors are dealing with high-needs students, who are disproportionately associated with injuries suffered by teachers and teacher aides. In fact, data collected over a five-year period demonstrates clearly that the most frequent cause of accidents for certified staff and teacher aides in Montana schools are fall/slip type injuries associated with working with this particular subset of our student population.

So where should the conversation begin? Let's start with the decision one makes about what type of shoes to wear to work. Though many of us prefer to wear more trendy, fashionable shoe, the reality is most of these shoes do not provide the non-slip support needed should one step on ice, snow, water or other slick surfaces. So let fashion slip! Put on shoes with thick leather sole and good traction.

Most accidents occur between the vehicle and the building. With that thought in mind, be cognizant of the conditions. If it has snowed overnight, then slow down, widen your stance, walk like a duck, and proceed cautiously. Also, sidewalks and parking lots may have cracks, unevenness from rising or falling, etc. Report the hazard and make sure that the area is clearly marked so others are not injured.

Most classrooms accidents can be avoided by keeping classrooms clean, neat, and well organized. Do not try and store more materials than your room was designed to safely handle. Identify and address tripping hazards within your classroom. Extension cords should only be used on a temporary basis. Do not try and exceed the capacity of the room's electrical system with plug strips and extension cords. Never run extension cords under rugs or over ceiling tiles, and do not hang extension cords hang from nails or staples. Also, do not run chords on the floor in areas in high traffic areas that can potentially cause injury to students and staff.

Teachers and teacher aides need to take additional precautions when hanging up items, putting up/taking down bulletin boards, pinning posters to the wall, etc. The MSGIA provided over 5,000 three-step step ladders to be placed in classrooms due to the number of injuries sustained by teachers and paraprofessionals working at considerable heights above the floor. That investment made an immediate impact in reducing claims across the state from staff using chairs, desks, tables or other makeshift devices while working above the floor. The lesson to be learned is simple: when working above the floor, use a three-step step ladder to avoid a fall and injury that would take you out of the classroom for a prolonged period of time.

The other area that the MSGIA is experiencing an increased number of accidents involves working with high needs students. There is a growing trend in aggressive behavior exhibited by students toward staff. A current article titled "The 7 Best Strategies for Working with Aggressive Students" from eteachershub: From teachers, For teachers.com August, 2015 provides the following simple, yet effective strategies:

1. **Separate aggressor and victims.** Normally dominant students who display aggression have a few "victims" that work like a trigger. Make sure that the aggressor and the potential victim don't sit together and don't leave the room at the same time.

2. **Establish Procedures.** According to Dr. Wong, effective teachers manage their classrooms with procedures, ineffective teachers discipline the students. The “procedures” include functional and realistic norms of behavior that students will have to obey in the classroom. The rules for classrooms should contain a clear “action-reaction” activities. So students who commit violent acts know what to expect and what the punishment will be, while students who behave well can expect the benefits. Make it clear at the beginning of the school year and you can expect less problems. Always follow the system, so the students know these are not empty words.
3. **Minimize a competition.** Competition in the classroom can trigger violent students. Cooperative Learning strategies can minimize competitions and enhance team work skills.
4. **Use nonverbal signals.** According to the recent studies, aggressive students respond better to the use of signals rather than teacher talk. Use body language signals of stop, stand, and silence to cool down the aggressive student.
5. **Early Intervention.** Don’t let the situation escalate to destructive and dangerous levels. You can do it through assigning a short interesting task, engaging the student in relaxation exercises, and engaging into problem-solving discussion.
6. **Never leave students alone** and never turn your back. This is a “golden rule” for teachers of challenging students. Constant supervision is a must.
7. **Be Prepared for Violent Behavior.** It’s important to recognize signals that usually precede a violent behavior in order to prevent a crisis. Some of the signals can be: turning red, cursing, crying, strange noises, and so on.

Sometimes teachers feel afraid of students who display aggressive and violent behaviors. In order to be an effective teacher, use the practical classroom strategies discussed above. Knowing how to spot and avoid a possible episode of aggression and violence can help you move from fear to confidence in managing challenging students.

The MSGIA recognizing the importance of teachers and teacher aides to the success of students. Being at school on a day to day basis can be accomplished by avoiding injuries. Good luck and have a great year!