

Guidance: 'Slap a teacher' and other monthly TikTok challenges

Oct. 5, 2021

Education Minnesota recently became aware of a nationwide challenge from students to other students through the social media platform TikTok, encouraging students to “slap a teacher” and document the assault via TikTok during the month of October.

This ill-advised challenge appears to be part of a series of TikTok challenges aimed at causing physical harm, humiliation, property damage and/or disruption within our schools. While we fortunately have not heard of any assaults on school staff in Minnesota since this challenge began, there were reports of vandalism based on the September challenge to “vandalize school bathrooms.” The full list of monthly TikTok challenges are as follows:

- September - Vandalize school bathrooms
- October - Slap a teacher/staff member
- November - Kiss your friend's girlfriend at school
- December - Deck the halls ... trash and inappropriate graffiti
- January - Jab a breast
- February - Vandalize school signs
- March - Vandalize the school's courtyard or cafeteria
- April - Grab some eggs/male genitalia
- May - Ditch day
- June - Flip off the school office
- July - Spray a neighbor's fence

Many of these challenges are illegal and could carry significant legal consequences for students who participate in them, in addition to any disciplinary actions that schools might take. In addition, they have the potential to further traumatize school communities that are already grappling with so many other challenges this year.

In recent statement to a Twin Cities television station, Education Minnesota President Denise Specht tried to strike the right balance between these interests while encouraging educators and administrators to collaborate with students to protect their shared working and learning environment from these dangerous social media events. Specht wrote:

“Nearly everyone in Minnesota wants their public schools to be safe, welcoming and effective for everyone in the school community of parents, students and educators. Violent and disrespectful acts against educators damage that community in profound ways, especially now. For the good of our schools, we hope parents and school administrators will communicate to students in advance that this social media stunt comes with serious consequences. Minnesota's public schools are the home away from home for tens of thousands of Minnesotans of all ages. It is time to come together -- students and staff -- to protect our house against the TikTok trendsetters who aim to harm us all.”

Guidance for Educators

Any educator who is assaulted by a student as part of one of these challenges should, at a minimum, complete an incident report with their school as soon as possible, so that the appropriate school authorities are notified.

If you are injured, seek medical attention promptly and maintain all your medical records. The school should send you the paperwork to complete a first report of injury to begin the process of applying for worker's compensation.

You have the right to contact your local law enforcement agency (police department) to report this incident so that they may press charges against the student(s) involved. If your school has a school resource officer, you may be expected to notify them first. Different educators may have different inclinations about contacting law enforcement based on the nature of the incident and the age and mental well-being of the student(s). Educators should be sensitive to consequences of early involvement with the criminal justice system, particularly for BIPOC students, for whom there is a well-established [school-to-prison pipeline](#), but schools should also not interfere or retaliate against an educator who decides to contact law enforcement to report an assault they have personally experienced.

[Minnesota law](#) requires all school districts to have a written districtwide discipline policy that, among other things, “states a student must be removed from class immediately if the student engages in assault or violent behavior... The removal shall be for a period of time deemed appropriate by the principal, in consultation with the teacher.” If your district either does not have such a policy or does not remove the student who has engaged in the assault, contact your building member rights representative as soon as possible. They will reach out to your Education Minnesota field staff if necessary.

If you have any personal property damaged in the course of an assault by a student, the NEA's Educator Employment Liability (EEL) policy will reimburse up to \$500 in property damage per assault. Contact your Education Minnesota field staff for more information.

Many school districts also have policies prohibiting students from taking unauthorized video or audio recordings within the classroom. While schools cannot and should not police all student behavior on social media, school districts do have the legal authority to investigate and respond to students who post unauthorized recordings within a classroom online—especially recordings of any actions promoted by these challenges—since they clearly have the effect of disrupting the educational environment.

Guidance for Local Leaders

As troubling as these TikTok challenges are, they provide an opportunity to show members the value of their union by working with administration to develop a plan to strongly discourage students from participating in these challenges in the first place.

If students in your district have already participated in the September bathroom vandalism challenge, or if there is widespread discussion about the October “slap a teacher” challenge, we recommend that your local reach out to their school administration to plan a districtwide response, which would include the following:

- Reviewing the district’s existing policies for responding to assaults on teachers, students, property damage, as well as posting unauthorized classroom recordings, and what the disciplinary consequences are for each.
- Communicating these policies to staff, parents and students along with a message to each of these groups about how the school or district will respond if students take part in them.
- Promoting the school’s anti-bullying policy, which includes cyber-bullying and is required by [Minnesota’s Safe and Supportive Schools Act](#). All students and staff should be aware of how to report bullying as defined in the district’s policy.

If an educator or the local union feels that the school district is not responding to actual violence or threats of such action, contact your Education Minnesota field staff for assistance. Staff safety is a term and condition of employment, and we can assist locals in demanding to bargain over the district’s response to these events.

In addition, the Minnesota Department of Education’s School Climate Center has developed [guidance](#) and [resources](#) to help school districts and schools implement restorative practices into school-wide climate, discipline, equity and teaching and learning practices. The center is also available to support districts and school teams interested in implementing restorative practices. For more information, contact nancy.riestenberg@state.mn.us or 651-582-8433.

While promoted for the sake of entertainment, the actions encouraged by these TikTok challenges involve violence, bullying and property damage that can cause long-lasting harm to students and the hard-working educators in our schools. Education Minnesota calls on all districts to take these threats seriously, and to be collaborative and proactive in discouraging them before they become commonplace.