

TikTok trouble: Schools wary of teacher assaults encouraged by social media campaigns



School officials warn of TikTok challenge that encourages students to slap teachers on the rear end

Schools already dealing with reacclimating students to classrooms this fall are now facing a new challenge: social media posts daring them to destroy school property and even hit teachers.

In August, Fulton County Schools held 60 tribunals for students in connection with serious offenses, such as bringing drugs or weapons to school. Then came the internet-driven pranks. Superintendent Mike Looney told his school board last week that he stepped up security after a social media platform hosted calls for vandalism and assault in schools starting last month.

Posts by users of TikTok, a platform for short and sometimes humorous video clips, have included various challenges over the years, [from full facial waxing to licking toilets](#). As school resumed this fall, students became the target actors, starting with September's "devious lick" challenge, encouraging theft from bathrooms.

"This TikTok nonsense that's creating havoc in schools across the country has to stop," Looney said, adding that parents must reimburse the district for any damages their children cause.

In Gwinnett County, Georgia's largest school district, several students faced criminal charges in connection with the bathroom challenge, Superintendent Calvin Watts told parents on Monday.

"In October, a new social media challenge has emerged, calling for students to slap a teacher on the backside," Watts wrote, adding that any such acts would be treated as sexual assault. He exhorted parents to talk with their children.

Cherokee County had to discipline students after bathroom soap, toilet paper dispensers, ceiling tiles and teachers' classroom supplies were stolen, according to a spokeswoman, with two cases producing misdemeanor juvenile charges of criminal trespass.

In neighboring Forsyth County Schools, families were charged up to \$500 in restitution after students acted on TikTok challenges at the majority of the middle and high schools, spokeswoman Jennifer Caracciolo said by email.

They were caught on cameras in the hallways outside restrooms and through anonymous reports by other students on a campus app. The maximum school punishment is long-term suspension, with criminal charges possible, she said.

Beverly Rice, who teaches at Maynard Holbrook Jackson High School in Atlanta, worries about the potential for escalation with the October challenge to [slap a teacher](#).

"Of course, all of the teachers are talking about it," Rice said. Some teachers at her school have said they would react violently if students follow through on the challenge. "So in essence, in jest, they're just basically saying they feel like if a kid assaults them that they're going to retaliate," she said, "but you know that's just talk."

Still, Rice has noticed more administrators in the hallways and said that makes her and other teachers feel safer: "Everyone is on high alert."

In Coweta County, [two students at Evans Middle School were charged](#) with crimes — theft for one and criminal trespass for the other — after soap dispensers were removed from walls and toilets were filled with paper towels, Channel 2 Action News reported last month. China-based TikTok said in that report that it is removing content that promotes or enables criminal activity.

U.S. law does not treat internet service providers as the publishers or speakers of the content they host, so they are not civilly liable for it, said Thomas Kadri, an assistant professor of law at the University of Georgia.

"Aside from the civil liability prong, there's no criminal law that I know of that would make TikTok's decision to kind of host this content illegal, and if there were such a criminal law it would certainly face First Amendment challenges," Kadri said.

In other words, schools and parents must live with the situation.

Caracciolo, the Forsyth spokeswoman, said parents and guardians should familiarize themselves with the various TikTok challenges that are pending, and discuss the consequences with their children.

"Upcoming challenges involve assault/causing bodily harm and public indecency/nudity," she noted

Rice, the Atlanta teacher, said social media is merely stoking a pre-existing problem. She estimated that one or two teachers have been assaulted by students at her school each year.

"In addition to COVID and catching COVID and kids coming to school sick every day and all of the other things we have to worry about, it's very unsettling to say the least," she said.