

What's at the heart of escalating violence in Ontario classrooms? New research points the way



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A colorful, stylized illustration featuring a pair of red scales of justice, a green book, a yellow dove with outstretched wings, and two blue human figures holding hands. The background is a mix of green, yellow, and pink shapes.

Timely news bulletins
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Violence, harassment in elementary schools at crisis levels, report



Violence against elementary school educators has risen seven-fold over 12 years and will remain unacceptably high unless sufficient supports are put in place, finds a new study.

Some 1,688 participating Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) members completed the Harassment and Violence against Educators (Ontario) Survey to capture their experience of a broad range of harassment and physical violence for the 2017-2018 school year.

Incidents escalating over time

Researchers from the University of Ottawa conducted the study, [Facing the Facts: The Escalating Crisis of violence against Elementary School Educators in Ontario](#), for ETFO that represents some 83,000 teachers, occasional teachers, and education professionals employed in Ontario's public elementary schools.

The survey results were then compared to the results from the first surveys commissioned by education unions in 2005. Then, only seven per cent of educators reported bullying or violence.

This latest survey of ETFO members found:

- More than half (54 per cent) have experienced physical violence such as punching, kicking or biting;
- 72 per cent reported verbal insults or obscene gestures from a student, 41 per cent said they had experienced the same at the hands of parents;
- About 70 per cent said workplace violence and harassment had increased dramatically in the last decade;
- Female educators, and those who identify as racialized, disabled or LGBTQ reported higher rates of harassment and violence;
- Violence and harassment were associated with poorer levels of physical and mental health among educators, as well as a diminished learning environment.

Unsupported educators *and* 'struggling' students

Despite the prevalence of classroom violence and harassment, nearly half of educators in this survey did not report their worst incident of violence (47 per cent). Many educators (50 per cent) said they were not confident dealing with an incident of harassment and even more (64 per cent) felt ill equipped to deal with incidents of physical violence. Other reasons educators cited for not reporting included the incident was too minor; they had a lack of time; they were discouraged to report by school administrators; and, they feared a reprisal.

The mounting research evidence led the authors of this latest report to conclude most educators will likely suffer a mental injury at some point during their careers. The impact of unchecked violence on student mental health was also raised as a significant concern.

Societal stressors, government policy and funding formulas are at the root of the problem, say the researchers. "In elementary classrooms across Ontario educators are scrambling to meet ever expanding expectations (e.g., more Individual Education Plans, more children in the classroom, standardized testing requirements) with decreasing levels of support and resources. The result is entirely predictable – frustrated struggling children whose needs are not being met 'lashing out'," they conclude.

Identified solutions

When asked what they needed to better meet the educational and emotional needs of their students, ETFO members identified several solutions with the potential to benefit both student learning and educator working conditions including:

- Additional and better access to frontline education supports including educational assistants and mental health specialists, and earlier identification of students' needs;
- More educational resources ranging from lower educator/student ratios, better spaces for teaching, and more relevant educational material;
- Clearer workplace policies and procedures and more consistent enforcement of these to address violent, harassing and inappropriate behaviour, and
- School administrators who are better trained, supportive and responsive.

As a result, the researchers conclude, "It is a crisis that is only likely to worsen. It is time to take action."

In a [press release](#), ETFO president, Sam Hammond responded, “Without additional and dedicated resources for students with behavioural challenges based on actual need, violent incidents will continue to threaten the safety of educators, compromising teacher working conditions and student learning conditions.”

This study is consistent with findings of a [2017 survey](#) conducted for Ontario English Catholic Teacher’s Association (OECTA) that found 60 per cent of educators had experienced violence and 70 per cent had witnessed student-perpetrated violence at school.

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[Ministry of Labour Workplace violence in school boards: A guide to the law](#)

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