

Special Report

Workplace violence solutions for schools central to recent ETFO symposium



Participants from across Canada came together to discuss the most urgent health and safety concern facing education workers today—growing violence and harassment in schools.

Drawing some 200 attendees from 48 different organizations, a symposium hosted by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) focused especially on the urgent need for solutions.

ETFO represents some 83,000 teachers, occasional teachers, and education professionals employed in Ontario's public elementary schools. In his opening remarks, ETFO president, Sam Hammond, remembered Devan Bracci-Selvey, 14, who was fatally stabbed behind his high school in Hamilton, Ontario and died in his mother's arms. Devan was bullied by other students in the weeks before his death. In this same environment, although **rarely making headlines**, educators also regularly experience violence and harassment on the job.

Said Hammond, "It breaks my heart to know some of our members have to wear Kevlar protective clothing in classrooms." Fearing that violence in schools is now normalized, Hammond challenged symposium participants to **consider a strategic vision** to address the issue. "We need a pan-Canadian approach to harassment and violence in our schools. This will require collaborative efforts, sustained resources and funding within and beyond the education sector," said Hammond.

Escalating violence

Mounting research evidence documents the increasing frequency and seriousness of classroom violence and harassment. **Violence against elementary school educators has risen seven-fold** over 12 years and will remain unacceptably high unless sufficient supports are put in place. These were among the findings presented to symposium participants by University of Ottawa researchers, Dr. Christine Bruckert and Dr. Darcy Santor. The two have collaborated to create the [Harassment and Violence against Educators \(Ontario\) Survey](#). Now conducted annually, the survey captures educators' experience of a broad range of harassment and physical violence.

Their latest survey of ETFO members, [first reported by Workers Health & Safety Centre](#) (WHSC) last October, found:

- 54 per cent have experienced physical violence from students such as punching, kicking or biting
- 72 per cent reported verbal insults or obscene gestures from a student; 41 per cent experienced the same at the hands of parents

- Female educators, and those who identify as racialized, disabled or LGBTQ report higher rates of harassment and violence
- Violence and harassment were associated with **poorer levels of physical and mental health in educators, as well as a diminished learning environment.**

The findings led Bruckert and Santor to conclude, “It is a crisis that is only likely to worsen. It is time to take action.” It was a fitting and powerful opening to the symposium.

Gendered-based violence

Dr. Peter Smith, Scientific Co-Director & Senior Scientist, Institute for Work & Health (IWH) came to similar conclusions. His symposium presentation concentrated on a body of emerging research on [gender differences in injuries attributed to workplace violence](#), research also earlier [reported by WHSC](#). He made it clear, when you drill down on data showing increased violence among working women in Ontario, you see it is women in the education sector who experience most of this violence.

Examining gender differences in data from two sources, emergency room visits in Ontario due to assaults at work and Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) accepted lost-time injuries (attributable to workplace violence over a 14-year study period ending in 2015), Smith and his IWH colleagues found both sources showed an increase among women workers. Women working in the education sector are four to six times more likely than their male colleagues to require time off due to work-related physical assaults.

Smith also shared these important observations:

- **Women educators now have a greater risk of experiencing violence** than both men and women working in health care
- Injuries to women educators are more likely to involve time off work
- Occupations with the greatest gender/sex segregation remain similarly segregated over a generation (e.g., historically most elementary school educators have been women, and still are).

A separate review of WSIB lost-time injury statistics shared by ETFO reveals elementary and secondary **school teacher assistants experience more injuries than correctional officers and police officers.**

Underreporting continues

Although physical assaults are more likely to be reported, many more incidents and threats go unreported, despite meeting the legal definition under the *Occupational Health & Safety Act (the Act)*. Regardless, all of these incidents can have lasting psychological impacts upon educators and students alike.

Education workers cite **many reasons for not reporting**, including:

- Incident was too minor
- Not confident dealing with harassment, less confident dealing with physical violence
- Lack of time
- Discouraged to report by school administrators
- Felt no action will be taken if they do report
- Believed they would be blamed, and
- Fear of reprisals.

Similar conclusions were reported in a study by the IWH, which examined [workplace violence reporting in six major Ontario hospitals](#) and found only 33 per cent of incidents were reported. That is changing. In addition to health and safety reporting requirements, since 2018 hospitals now report annually to the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care the number of workplace violence incidents as a [mandatory indicator in their quality improvement plans](#).

Understanding the **need for such system-wide approaches** in the education sector too, the [Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety](#) was established in the 2014-17 round of collective bargaining. With representatives from ETFO, other teacher federations and education worker unions, principal associations, school boards and government, the group has worked to address a host of issues including workplace violence in the provinces' publicly funded schools.

Removing reporting barriers

A first priority for the education working group was to identify and remove some of the barriers to reporting incidents of violence and harassment. To date, they have developed an online violent incident reporting system with modest setup funds from the Ministry of Education; a process Road Map to help clarify reporting requirements under *the Act*, the *Education Act* and the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act*, and a resource guide, [Workplace violence in school boards: A guide to the law](#).

While **practices in school boards vary greatly**, some are making good progress. The symposium included a panel of education sector health and safety representatives from both Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) who shared their experiences of incident reporting and the role the joint health and safety committee (JHSC) can play. Both Toronto and Ottawa school boards have developed substantive policies and procedures for reporting incidents of violence and harassment. (Pictured above: Education Panel members sharing their workplace experience l-r) Lee-Anne Feltham, Janice McCoy, Chris Broadbent, Valence Young (ETFO)).

A good reporting system is the first step in establishing an effective program noted Chris Broadbent, former health and safety manager at the Toronto District School Board. For the system to be effective though, gathered information needs to be shared with key workplace stakeholders including the JHSC to help inform prevention efforts.

Janice McCoy, Superintendent of Human Resources and Lee-Anne Feltham, health and safety officer for Ottawa-Carleton's ETFO Local, co-chair the OCDSB's JHSC. Among their focused efforts, OCDSB has set up a violence sub-committee that meets monthly to review incident reports, explore trends, review the adequacy of existing supports and identify other gaps.

Despite a common online reporting form, many believe the Ministry of Education needs to better support its implementation to ensure reporting is consistent and it is in fact happening. Even with standardized reporting and easier online access, other barriers persist says the IWH's Smith, "If workers report incidents **they want to know what the employer is going to do about it**. In workplaces with good reporting cultures workers don't get blamed." Regardless, full and consistent reporting is critical in order to identify the extent of the problem and to evaluate existing or new prevention activities, he adds.

Examining root causes

Many believe the overlooked root causes of escalating school violence include societal stressors, government policy and funding formulas to name a few. As University of Ottawa researchers, Dr. Bruckert and Dr. Santor observed, "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'**."

[People for Education](#), executive director, Annie Kidder, a guest speaker at the symposium, agrees. Kidder shared research on the **impact of funding cuts and policy changes** on public education resources and programs in Ontario, including:

- Conference Board of Canada [research](#) findings reveal every dollar of public education spending generates \$1.30 in total economic impacts. Also, each additional high school graduate saves Ontario an average \$2,767 on social assistance, health care, and criminal justice costs.
- Children's Mental Health Ontario [reports](#) tell us as many as one in five children and youth in Ontario will experience some form of mental health problem and five out of six will not receive the treatment they need.
- People for Education's recent [reporting on students' mental health](#) found the proportion of schools reporting no access to psychologists has nearly doubled in the last five years and regional disparities across Ontario mean schools in Northern and Southwestern Ontario are much less likely to have access to mental health supports than schools in the Greater Toronto Area.

The **social determinants of health**, and social inequality in particular, must also be taken into account, says Christine Preece, Co-Chair of [Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition](#) and Mental Health Lead for St. Clair Catholic District School Board. As such, solutions to school-based violence also need to look **beyond the school environment**. In her symposium presentation, Preece proposed creating a healthy schools' focus based on a common understanding of the collective impacts of violence on children and educators alike and the need for collective action.

Early interventions

More specifically, Preece called for upstream solutions, preventative in nature, such as providing better and sufficiently resourced supports for the social development of children as soon as they enter the school system. For example, **Ontario schools used to assess children as early as kindergarten**, but now those assessments do not occur until Grade 3.

Preece also noted that California's recently appointed and first Surgeon General, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, recommends screening every child for [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACES\)](#) before entering school. Research has shown **childhood trauma** (e.g., abuse, parental divorce) **affects brain development**, can create multiple vulnerabilities and increase the risk of developing mental illness and other health problems. With an early assessment and care plan for children, educators can establish a safe and appropriate learning path for every child.

Closer to home, a 2019 [policy paper](#) by the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health focuses on the social-emotional development of children aged three to six. The paper identifies the need to assess children early on and provide appropriate supports for them, their families and service providers. The report also recommends more **cross-sectoral partnerships** to strengthen and align early childhood mental health services.

Improving learning AND working environments

In addition to presentations, the ETFO symposium offered an opportunity for all gathered to learn from each other and develop meaningful recommendations.

Through breakout groups, **symposium participants were able to share experiences** and explore solutions. Key themes emerged, many previously voiced by ETFO members in a survey in which they were asked what they needed to better meet the educational and emotional needs of their students. The most effective solutions are those that will improve both student learning and educator working conditions. Piecemeal approaches, such as a recently announced government initiative to [survey students about bullying](#) and provide de-escalation techniques to educators, are no longer adequate say educators.

In summary, they identified **effective and systemic recommendations** as including:

- Additional and better access to frontline education supports including educational assistants
- More mental health professional supports for children with special needs and mental health issues and earlier identification of students' needs
- Greater involvement of JHSCs in developing individualized and general school safety plans
- Lower educator/student ratios
- Clearer workplace policies and procedures and more consistent enforcement to address violent, harassing and inappropriate behaviour
- Resources and awareness campaigns to destigmatize mental health issues
- Campaigns and messaging to ensure school-based violence is no longer normalized
- Consistent and robust reporting to ensure all incidents are captured, and addressed
- A dedicated Provincial Round Table on Violence in the Education sector, much like the [Workplace Violence Prevention in Health Care Leadership Table](#)
- Province-wide consultation to develop a sustainable *whole school* approach to mental health and related changes to the Ontario curriculum to reflect this.

Many also continue to **call for a specific Education Sector Regulation under *the Act*** to reflect the working conditions in schools, work environments not well addressed by the Industrial Regulations.

Need for quality training

Educators further believe better training for all school board employees, from administrators to custodians, especially better trained, supportive and responsive supervisors would help lay a solid foundation for meaningful prevention efforts.

All Ontario **employers have significant legal obligations** to address workplace violence and harassment. Chief among these is an **employer duty** to develop and implement workplace violence and harassment policies and program(s). To this end, the employer must also provide all workers with information and instruction on the content of these policies and related measures. Unfortunately, some Ontario school boards are attempting to comply with these requirements by sending PowerPoint presentations to educators and calling it training.

In response, many are suggesting it is time to develop a **standard for workplace violence training**; much like [an effective training standard](#) was developed to combat construction worker injury and death from working at heights.

Dave Killham, executive director, Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC) could not agree more. “When it comes to prevention, **PowerPoint presentations and passive online training get a failing grade**. We have seen how training standards in construction have helped improve employer compliance, hazard control and better health and safety outcomes when it comes to working at heights,” says Killham.

He adds, “Properly addressing violence and harassment in schools, like any other workplace hazard begins by identifying root causes. Quality training can help build the competence and confidence to undertake this important prevention work. At WHSC, as with ETFO and its members, our training programs focus ultimately on hazard solutions. **Our programs targeting hazards in schools**, and including workplace violence and harassment training, are no exceptions. So equipped, we stand ready to assist education workers in schools across Ontario.”

Related resources:

[ETFO Health and Safety resources](#)

[California's first surgeon general: Screen every student for childhood trauma](#)

[Children's Mental Health Ontario](#)

[ILO report examines workplace violence prevention through a gender lens](#)

WHSC training resources for education sector:

Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC) offers a range of [resources](#), including a three-hour [Workplace Violence and Harassment Prevention Training program](#) designed to help workplace parties better understand workplace violence, harassment and bullying and to fully comply with legal obligations. We also have another program to help schools develop effective lockdown procedures. And we offer training programs to help employers meet the training and competency requirements for [supervisors](#), [joint health and safety committee members](#) and [worker health and safety representatives](#) who all play essential roles in the pursuit of healthier and safer workplaces, including a [Certification Part II training program for the education sector](#).