

Violence in Schools

Key Messages

- The number and severity of violent incidents in public elementary schools is increasing. This is alarming and must be addressed.
- Students are having their learning disrupted and violence is becoming normalized in schools because the Ford government refuses to address the issue.
- Years of provincial underfunding and chronic understaffing have resulted in students' needs going unmet. Nothing short of adequate funding and resources will solve the problem.
- Front-line supports are not always available, and school administrators do not consistently act on violent incident reports.

All-Member Survey

- ETFO commissioned national research firm Strategic Communications to conduct a survey of its members regarding their experiences of workplace violence.
- An all-member survey and focus groups were conducted between February 8 and March 22, 2023.
- Almost 25,000 ETFO members participated in the survey.

Prevalence and Severity of Violence in Schools

- 80% of respondents say that the number of violent incidents in elementary schools has increased since they began working in public education, while 66% say that the severity of the violence is worse.

Experiencing Violence

- 52% of members have experienced an attempt of physical force against them this school year (2022-2023), while 44% report having experienced actual physical force against them.
- Experiences of actual physical force and attempted physical force against members are highest among those working with Kindergarten students and decreases by grade.
- Women are more likely to have experienced physical force or an attempt of physical force than men.
- Persons with a disability, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit members, and 2SLGBTQ+ members are more likely to have experienced an attempt of physical force.
- A majority of persons with a disability and First Nations, Métis and Inuit members have experienced actual force against them.
- Designated early childhood educators (DECE)/educational support personnel (ESP)/professional support personnel (PSP) are more likely to have experienced actual physical force against them (61%) or an attempt of physical force (65%).

Witnessing Violence

- More than 60% have witnessed a statement or behaviour that could be interpreted as a threat of physical force against another staff member, while 58% witnessed an attempt.
- ETFO DECE, ESP and PSP members are most likely to witness actual physical force, and attempts of physical force.

Disruption to Teaching and Learning

- 87% agree that violence in elementary schools is making teaching/working with students more difficult.
- 83% say violent incidents often interfere with classroom management.
- 35% of ETFO members participated in a classroom evacuation during the 2022-2023 school year.
- An entire generation of students is witnessing violence at school and having their learning disrupted on a constant basis, which is unacceptable.

Injury, Illness and Stress

- In addition to disruptions in learning, the vast majority of ETFO members have experienced harm as a result of violence against them: psychological injury/illness (53%), physical injury (24%), and physical illness or other health effects (11%).
- A majority (63%) took sick leave to recover from physical injury due to violence.
- About one-in-five members took time off work to deal with the psychological or emotional impacts after personally experiencing violence against them.

Staffing and Supports

- Members indicate that in-class, board-level and in-school supports have decreased during the time they have worked in the public education system. Student spaces and community supports have also decreased.
- Occasional teacher members say they are reluctant to take daily and short-term positions in schools where they believe there is a greater risk of experiencing violence, or where administrators are less likely to support staff experiencing violence.

School Board Response to Violent Incidents

- 23% of members said actions to prevent a recurrence happened rarely or never. Nearly half of members who report an incident think the actions or steps taken afterwards were ineffective in preventing a recurrence of the violent incident.
- School boards are not getting the necessary funding from the government to ensure elementary students are getting early assessments, access to front-line support workers, and other services that they need.
- The issue cannot be addressed at the school and school board level alone; it must be addressed by the provincial government.

Incident Reporting and Safety Plans

- Under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, school boards, as employers, are required to take “every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker.”
- Boards put in place safety plans to keep students, their peers, and workers safe from violence, but these are often ineffective, outdated, or missing entirely.
- 44% of members said that safety plans were not generally effective at keeping students and workers safe.
- Incidents of workplace violence must be reported using online reporting systems, but administrators sometimes discourage reporting, or don’t follow up when they know incidents aren’t being reported.
- Although 58% of members who experienced violence informed their administrators, only 41% indicated that they always made a written/online report, meaning that administrators are aware of the significant underreporting of violence.

What is Needed

- Violence in schools won’t be addressed until the government’s underfunding and understaffing of elementary schools ends.
- The government needs to hold administrators and school boards accountable for compliance with health and safety legislative and policy requirements and reporting of incidents. These are minimum statutory obligations set out in the *Education Act*, *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and Ministry of Education documents.
- School boards need more resources to be able to provide:
 - more front-line supports, including special education and specialist teachers, educational assistants, social workers, child and youth workers, and others
 - more school resources to provide earlier assessments for students in need of support
 - more funding for special education services
 - community supports for families
- The provincial government had the opportunity to strengthen public education in Ontario through this year’s budget, but instead they are forcing school boards to make cuts to services, which means cuts to necessary student supports.
- They are misleading the public into believing that they are “investing” in public education when this simply isn’t true.
- Ontario students, education workers and families deserve a fully funded, high-quality, equitable and inclusive public education system.