



January 29, 2018

The Honourable Indira Naidoo-Harris
Minister of Education
22nd Floor, Mowat Block
900 Bay St.
Toronto, ON.
M7A 1L2

Dear Minister,

As we discussed last Friday during our introductory call with one another, the issue of violent incidents in schools, is of concern to us.

Principals and vice-principals agree with the respondents to the ETFO survey, that there has been an increase in the number and severity of violent incidents in schools, primarily from students suffering from behavioural and/or mental health issues. With the resources available to us, schools have become ill equipped to deal with students who have needs that cannot be met in the school setting, and whose unacceptable and often dangerous behaviour is hurting themselves, their classmates and the whole school community.

While teachers have been impacted by these incidents, so too have all other staff members, including Educational Assistants, support staff, vice-principals and principals. Often, teachers send these students to the office, where the principal and/or the office staff then must monitor, discipline, watch and de-escalate the situation. More recently, we are seeing an emerging trend that when principals do intervene, they are vulnerable to allegations being made against them to the Children's Aid Society or the Ontario College of Teachers, sometimes initiated by the very staff they step in to support and relieve.

Principals are increasingly spending a far greater amount of time personally supervising students who have engaged in violent and dangerous behaviour. Many of these students need support and treatment, not time-outs in the office. We are also hearing of an increasing number of situations in which principals and vice-principals are being hurt by students, sometimes requiring medical attention. While it is unacceptable that any staff member be put in this situation, it is certainly not teachers alone who are on the receiving end of inappropriate – and sometimes dangerous – behaviour from students.

We support ETFO's call for an increase in funding for supports to assist students and staff. In our upcoming policy paper to all political parties in advance of the June provincial election, this is an issue that we will be specifically addressing, calling for

- additional training for school staff to ensure they can recognize the needs of students with physical, emotional and behavioural needs that are currently unmet, and refer them to the appropriate medical practitioner
- mental health leads (similar to literacy and numeracy leads) available to every school to assist in assessing students and helping them find the appropriate medical treatment and
- endorsement, funding and implementation of OPC Supervision Standards to ensure more trained adults in schools.

Unfortunately, ETFO President Sam Hammond stated that, "About 60 per cent of our members have reported when they've been involved in a violent incident but what they've also reported is at least 50 per cent of the time, there has been no significant short- or long-term follow-up by school administrators or school boards." Since we were not involved in formulating the survey, nor privy to its actual data, it is difficult to assess the accuracy of this statement. What we can advise is that it is inconsistent with the seriousness with which our Members regard and deal with violent incidents that occur in schools.

When there are incidents impacting school safety, principals and vice-principals follow board policies, and in serious situations, consult with their Superintendent. It is not always possible to provide immediate feedback to teachers about the steps being taken to support students in crisis situations, but we value good communication with our staff and do our best to keep them informed.

Principals and vice-principals are required to consider mitigating factors (such as mental health diagnoses) when considering disciplinary action for students whose behaviour has violated the Code of Conduct. Teachers can always seek more information about their principal's decisions in respect of a student if they have been involved in an incident with them that caused them concern for their safety. We care about the safety of our staff and students, and are doing our best to ensure safe learning environments with the resources we have and within the legislative requirements around discipline and accommodation of special needs.

In your response to the report, you stated that our schools must be safe, inclusive and welcoming places for students, their families, teachers and staff. We agree and trust that you include principals and vice-principals in your definition of "staff" and will take steps to ensure that their right to be safe at work is also protected.

This situation requires urgent action. It does not require finger pointing or blame. We value all staff who are working with students who are challenged by behavioural and other issues. We need to work together to ensure we can meet the needs of all our students in school environments that are safe and welcoming. We urge you in your role as Minister to address this situation as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

Mary Linton
President

Cc OPSBA
PCODE
OPSOA
ETFO