

Violent Incidents in Schools

Over the past number of years, teachers, principals, vice-principals and education support staff have reported an increase in the number and severity of violent incidents in schools. In 2018, we surveyed principals and vice-principals to collect data on the issue. 1,224 school leaders from across Ontario responded to the survey.

They reported that in the 2017/18 school year

- 84% were directly involved in an incident in which a student acted in a violent way or threatened violence
- 87% directly intervened in such an incident at the request of another staff member
- 40% were involved in such incidents more than 10 times during the school year
- 45% were hurt during such incidents.

This is an increasingly alarming issue, one that affects our school communities, staff and students. Anecdotally, our Members believe there are many factors that contribute to an increased number of violent incidents: special needs students who struggle with aggressive outbursts, student mental health challenges, increased incidents of bullying societally, socio economic issues such as poverty, less supervision, fewer specialized school staff to work with students, increased behavioural diagnoses and fewer community resources. All of these issues go well beyond the walls of the school.

In addition to student-to-student violence, we are now seeing more incidents of student-to-staff violence. Safe working conditions must exist for all staff – including principals and vice-principals.

Inconsistent and inaccurate reporting across school boards makes this issue a difficult one to report and track. Yet we know from our survey and data collected from other education groups that the number and severity of incidents are on the rise.







There are fewer staff available to manage these incidents and fewer people available to respond when violence occurs, given the decline in Educational Assistants (EAs), child and youth workers, nurses, psychologists and guidance counsellors. There are fewer staff to meet the needs of students, including restorative practices following an incident to re-integrate students and re-establish a safe learning environment. Where additional staff have been hired, their numbers have not kept pace with the number of students and the complexity of their needs.

Principals and vice-principals are educators, not medical professionals, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, resource coordinators or police officers. We are not trained to treat complex medical needs. Community supports are often lacking or inadequate, and long waiting lists for community care intensify these challenges. Without specialized resources, training and personnel, our ability to provide a safe learning environment for all students is compromised.

We, alone, don't have the solution to this very serious issue, but we know we have to find one. It will take many people working together to do so. To date, we have been filling gaps without addressing the underlying issues. Implementing short-term measures is not enough.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively deal with this issue, we recommend

-  The establishment of a Think Tank to study the background, history and data available, and develop recommendations to decrease the number and severity of such incidents. The Think Tank should be made up of educators, parents, students, government ministries, community/mental health agencies, institutional health agencies and police officers.
-  The collection of more evidence-based data, interpreted by external researchers to find out which students are acting out and why, and what factors are contributing to the increase.
-  Additional focused resources for schools from the government to assist students with complex behavioural needs, whose conduct has led to injuries and unsafe working conditions for staff
-  A consistent, accurate reporting mechanism for all school boards to ensure these incidents are monitored, reported and investigated thoroughly.
-  Mental health leads (similar to literacy and numeracy leads) in every school to determine the unmet physical, emotional and behavioural needs of students and refer them to the appropriate medical practitioner/resource.
-  A jointly developed plan so school boards can respond to violent incidents against staff, consistently track the data for these incidents and provide appropriate supports to the staff in the aftermath.
-  The endorsement and adoption of consistent, province-wide Supervision Standards appropriately funded by the government to ensure all schools are adequately staffed and supervised.