

# Teachers grappling with violence and harassment

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Biting. Punching. Kicking. A stapler thrown at a teacher's head.

Classroom evacuations three times a week to de-escalate the situation. Upturned desks.

Even a general lack of respect. Threats. Profanities.

One child remarked: "You're so terrible, I can't believe you even have a boyfriend. How can anybody love you?"

Another said: "My dad has a gun and I'm going to bring it to school and show you."

Accounts of classroom violence have steadily reached Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association elementary unit president Jennifer McArthur over the years - so when provincial data showed more than 4,400 violent incidents were reported in Ontario schools during the 2023-24 academic year, it only confirmed what educators already knew.

"The phone calls continue to come to me from teachers who are concerned about violent incidents in their classrooms, particularly ones that repeat," said McArthur.

"(Teachers) have told me that they have actively looked for other jobs, that they have been seeking counselling and assistance from family physicians on how to handle what they're seeing - both in the violence and the harassment from students."

Earlier this year, Ontario School Board Council of Unions released a report based on responses from 12,000 education workers across the province.

It found 74.6 per cent of staff had experienced violent or disruptive incidents on the job - with more than a third facing them daily.

Among educational assistants and child and youth workers, the numbers were even higher, with 95.8 per cent reporting violence at work and half saying it happened every day.

McArthur said the behaviours teachers are seeing often stem from deeper challenges, especially among students who haven't had access to early intervention or support services. Many haven't been formally assessed with learning or behavioural disorders, let alone diagnosed, and they are still developing self-regulation and social skills - especially after the isolation of the pandemic.

Applied behaviour specialists offer help, but there are only "so many teams to go around."

"I don't want it to ever seem like I'm blaming students because, especially in elementary, sometimes these are (young) students, and it's the only way they know to make their needs known," she said.

"But at the same time, teachers are not mental-health experts, we're not social workers, psychologists. There's just not the support."

Overcrowded classrooms with limited one-on-one attention, less resources and limited in-school supports have made it harder for educators to manage increasingly complex classroom environments.

All on top of pressures to meet Education Ministry achievement standards, with the result a learning environment where both teachers and students feel unsettled.

"A lot of the mental-health supports are really required, trying to get down to the root causes of what's causing the violence," said McArthur, adding Niagara Catholic District School Board recently hired additional education resource teachers.

"It's really distressing for (teachers) when they know a student needs help and they honestly feel like the student deserves better. But this is what we've got right now."

A University of Ottawa report focused on the growing rate and impact of violence in Ontario schools. Its study said front-line education workers are being pushed to the brink - they're expected to sacrifice their safety and well-being while students miss necessary supports, impacting learning and emotional well-being.

McArthur said some students are scared or distracted by the incidents while others don't know how to process what they're seeing. She recalled receiving a phone call from a parent whose primary-aged daughter regularly witnesses violent incidents unfold in her classroom, worried about her teacher and classmates getting hurt.

"That happens in an environment where the other students are now all looking at the teacher to see what (their) reaction's going to be," said McArthur.

Brian O'Rourke, newly appointed president of the Niagara secondary unit, spent the past 25 years in a high school classroom. He said violence isn't limited to physical acts, and schools are witnessing a "general decline in civility."

The "problematic" lack of respect is not only between students but in how they speak to adults around the building, whether it's a custodian, librarian or principal.

"As a young teacher, I used to have to say to kids, 'You don't have to call me sir,' because that was appropriate," said O'Rourke. "In the last five years or so, the comment has changed; it's more so, 'Please don't call me bro.'"

Providing students with support earlier - expanding the role of educational assistants, adding more guidance counsellors and youth workers - could help prevent frustration from escalating into poor behaviour and "lower the temperature in the schools," O'Rourke said.

When a violent incident occurs, procedures are in place to de-escalate the situation, and a reporting tool is available. But O'Rourke said many teachers are reluctant to file reports - whether due to apathy, believing it won't make a difference, or because they're already overwhelmed and overburdened.

"You overcrowd a space, and it becomes difficult for teachers to manage those behaviours and to form relationships with students," he said. "You're putting out fires all the time and not ever able to create that classroom environment most conducive to learning."

McArthur said educators are encouraged to use an online reporting form, so a formal record of incidents are recorded. It's hoped it can help school boards track data efficiently while also help determine which classrooms or schools need additional support.

"Everybody should be able to go into school in the morning and feel confident that they're going to work or learn or clean or administer in a safe and healthy environment," said McArthur. "And that there are sufficient supports and training to ensure that happens."

In an email, Emma Testani, press secretary for the Education Minister Paul Calandra, said the provincial government has increased funding for safety initiatives, including to provide funding to hire psychologists, social workers, child/youth workers and educational assistants.

In response to the NDP's calls for an emergency plan, Testani said the rise of school violence coincides with some school boards' "short-sighted decision" to end school resource officer programs in 2017.

She said the government introduced measures requiring school boards to work with police to "develop student resource officer and youth engagement programs that will help foster positive relationships between students and law enforcement while making schools safer."

O'Rourke said the government often points to historic levels of funding, but recent reports suggest "something isn't adding up."

He said the issue may be systemic, and a co-ordinated approach may be needed.

"The parent and teacher relationship used to be very much one that was cohesive; whereas now, at times, it can feel like it's more antagonistic," he said.

"If children feel their parents don't have respect for the system, then why would the child?"

Brock University child and youth studies assistant professor Natalie Spadafora conducted a research study that showed classroom civility - defined as a low-level of anti-social behaviour with a more ambiguous intent to cause harm - decreased following the pandemic.

In June, she conducted focus groups with Ontario primary teachers who spoke about defiance and dysregulation, but concerns extended to violence in the classroom and a lack of supports.

Spadafora said disruptions or interrupting classmates can be frustrating for teachers, and if left unchecked, low-level issues can escalate into higher-level antisocial behaviours - with a study looking at adolescent incivility as a predictor of bullying.

"It can start small and if they don't get ahead of it, it becomes more problematic," she said.

Brian Barker, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario Niagara president, said while the Ontario government boasts about "historic investments," the reality is different. Per-student funding has decreased by about \$1,500 per student, representing more than \$3 billion in cuts from provincial public schools.

Barker said the government knows "chronic underfunding of public education will have a detrimental impact on students and our members, and (doesn't) seem to care."

"There are fewer resources to support the students with the most significant needs or to address the ever-increasing violence taking place in our schools across the province," said Barker.

"They continue to put school boards in the difficult position of having to decide which essential supports they will have to stop providing."

Communications and community engagement officer Jennifer Pellegrini said Niagara Catholic District School Board recognizes classroom violence has increased. While the challenge is not unique to the board, reducing incidents of classroom violence is a "shared responsibility including staff, students and parents."

"We have regular communication between our school-based staff, support staff, senior staff, principals and union partners to discuss how we can continue to improve the tools, processes and resources, within the provincial funding allocation," said Pellegrini in an email.

"As a system, we are committed to providing staff with training to implement strategies and supports designed to redirect and de-escalate situations, with the goal of preventing and reducing violent incidents at school."

District School Board of Niagara public relations manager Milica Petkovic said each reported incident is taken seriously, with protocols in place to "ensure swift and appropriate responses."

She said DSBN's proactive approach - expanded youth counselling, restorative practices and a focus on belonging and well-being - has helped reduce violent incidents by addressing challenges early and promoting accountability.

"Staff are trained to report incidents, which are then reviewed at both the school and system level to ensure effective followup," said Petkovic, adding ongoing professional development provides staff with strategies to help de-escalate situations.

"School-based teams work closely with our mental health and well-being, special education and safe schools' teams, in close collaboration with union partners, to address challenges and strengthen supports across DSBN schools."