SAFE AT SCHOOL

OSSTF/FEESO Policy Paper on

Building Safer School Communities

May, 2025
New edition with a report from the *Safe at School* summit on solutions to workplace violence

OSSTF/FEESO

Greetings,

As President of OSSTF/FEESO, I am deeply proud of the work that our members do to foster safe and caring learning environments for Ontario students. OSSTF/FEESO represents an incredibly diverse set of skilled professionals—from speech and language pathologists and child and youth workers to educational assistants, early childhood educators, social workers, and teachers. Office staff and custodial staff are often overlooked within the education system, but we know the system wouldn't function without them.

Yet too many of our members have either directly experienced or witnessed acts of violence in their workplaces. It happens to their colleagues, and it happens between the students under their care. The impact is deeply damaging, in terms of both physical and mental health.

To address this growing concern, OSSTF/FEESO organized our Safe at School Summit in January 2025. I am grateful to the two hundred people who attended, coming from a wide range of organizations and worksites. The fact that they took time out of their busy lives to come together for difficult conversations about violence is a tribute to their deep commitment to Ontario's public education system.

I was particularly grateful that the leaders of three of the four parties represented in the Ontario Legislature made the time to bring greetings to the summit. More importantly, I feel deeply encouraged that Marit Styles (Leader of the Ontario New Democrats), Bonnie Crombie (Leader of the Ontario Liberal Party) and Mike Schriener (Leader of the Ontario Green Party) clearly and unequivocally affirmed their strong support for a well-funded public education system. Each of them understood that we can respond to and reduce violence in school settings, but that we need proper funding and policy support from the Ministry of Education to achieve that goal.

The Policy Paper you are holding (or reading digitally) and the report on the Summit that we've included as a postscript captures OSSTF/FEESO's analysis of the problem and—as importantly—our recommendations on how to address it.

This document sets out our priorities for combatting workplace violence in education. We look forward to working with you and to continuing to commit to the essential work of protecting safe, quality, public education in Ontario.

In solidarity,

Karen Littlewood
President of OSSTF/FEESO

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List of Acronyms

Note: The following acronyms are used throughout this document. Please refer to this list for the fully spelled-out forms.

2SLGBTQIA+—Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual
AEFO—L'Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens
CUPE—Canadian Union of Public Employees
CYW—child and youth worker
EA—educational assistant
ECE—early childhood educator
ETFO—The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
FTE—full-time equivalent
IEP—Individual Education Plan
JHSC—Joint Health and Safety Committee
OECTA—Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association
OHSA—Occupational Health and Safety Act
OSR—Ontario Student Record
OSSTF/FEESO—The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation / Fédération des enseignantes-enseignants des écoles secondaires de l'Ontario
OTF—Ontario Teachers' Federation
PPM—Policy/Program Memorandum
PSSP—professional student support personnel
PWGHS—Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety
SSP—Student Safety Plan
WSIB—Workplace Safety and Insurance Board

Executive Summary and Recommendations

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation—like our partners across the public education system—has a vision for public education. We believe in public schools as places where students, teachers, and a wide range of education workers come together in a shared commitment to foster student learning and growth. Unfortunately, this vision is all too often disrupted by outbursts of violent and otherwise discourteous behaviour. Such instances of violence make learning difficult, if not impossible. Students deserve better, but the problem is getting worse.

Violence in schools is a system-level problem that requires system-level responses. Although violence generally manifests as individualized behaviours, the contexts out of which violent behaviours emerge warrant as much attention as the problematic behaviours themselves. Paying attention to system-level factors and how they impact behaviour at the school-wide and student level is essential to the fundamental project of public education: creating safe and nurturing environments where students can learn about the increasingly complex world around them and develop the critical thinking skills they will need to navigate that world.

A key system-level factor that must be taken into consideration is the serious underfunding of public education in Ontario. Ontario ranks fifth among all provinces in its education spending and is spending up to $1,500 per student less now than it was in 2018-2019. The result is a severe strain on staffing, classroom resources, and programs to support vulnerable students. Underfunding creates instability in the system and creates major barriers to providing students with the learning opportunities they deserve.

The data on the frequency and type of violence experienced by students, teachers, and education workers are deeply troubling, but violence is not inevitable. We can build and grow a strong public education system that proactively creates safe learning environments for students and ensures that every worker returns home safe and unharmed at the end of the day. Each section in this discussion paper is accompanied by concrete, actionable recommendations to address workplace violence in schools. Many of these require action from the Minister of Education and the Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. Most require collaboration and cooperation among public education's many stakeholders, including the Ministries, school boards, unions, school administrators, parents, and, of course, teachers and education workers. But all of the recommendations are doable, and change is achievable, if concrete actions are taken by decision-makers now.

In making these recommendations, OSSTF/FEESO is aware of the challenges that stakeholders face.

- Teachers and education workers directly experience and witness a range of violent acts. These acts target teachers and education workers as well as students. They include threats, assaults, verbal abuse, and property damage. In 2023, OSSTF/FEESO commissioned a study focused on members in the K-12 sector, by independent research firm Stratcom. Stratcom found:

    - 31% of respondents reported experiencing a direct incident of physical violence in the last year.
    - This number rises to 63% of ECEs, 70% of CYWs, and 75% of EAs.
    - The problem is getting worse. Nearly seven in ten respondents (69%) said that violence had worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.[1]

- The impacts of violence include personal and professional harm to teachers and education workers, and damage to students' well-being and readiness to learn. For teachers and education workers, the result is increased absences from work and increased likeliness to consider leaving the profession. This exacerbates existing challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers and a wide range of education workers. For students, the result is reduced access to instruction, negative impacts on emotional well-being (exacerbating an emerging crisis in youth mental health), and a reduced capacity to learn. These impacts all work directly against the shared goal of creating safe and nurturing learning environments to support growth and critical thinking.

- Violence is a system-level problem, and, therefore, there is an urgent need to amend our laws and policies to address that problem. In particular, there is a need for several initiatives related to the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA). These initiatives should include a new

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education sector regulation that recognizes the specific challenges faced by schools and other education worksites. They should also include the creation of a provincial advisory committee tasked with understanding and addressing the unique challenges of violence in schools and other educational worksites. In addition, there needs to be coordinated efforts to improve awareness of the requirements under OHSA and how those work in relation to the Education Act. Of particular importance is educating administrators and employees that—except where the life, health, or safety of a student is in jeopardy—the rights and obligations set out by OHSA take priority over the requirements established by the Education Act. At the same time, the codes of conduct, reporting regimes, and disciplinary practices that are described in the Education Act need to be revisited and clarified through collaborative work by all stakeholders.

- Ultimately, the most important interventions to reduce violence depend upon the government providing appropriate resources. School funding should reflect the need for more education workers within schools. School administrators should have the support and resources they need, so that when they receive reports of violent incidents, they can act upon them swiftly and meaningfully. To achieve this, the provincial government must step up and ensure there is sufficient funding to hire more education workers and to create programs to incentivize talented people to enter those essential professions.

- We can make real progress on school violence, but achieving that progress will require deeply collaborative efforts. This requires a Safe at School Action Table, mandated to develop a Safe at School Action Plan. This table should include representatives from the Ministries of Education; Health; and Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development working with representatives from education unions, school boards, and community groups. At the same time, unions need to continue to do their own work developing enhanced training on mental well-being and their rights under OHSA, and jointly advocating for system-level changes to build non-violent cultures in schools.

The task before us is daunting but achievable. More than that, it is urgently necessary. The students in our collective care deserve safe and nurturing learning environments. They should go home safe and uninjured at the end of the day, as should every worker. The recommendations proposed in this discussion paper are intended to divide this project into concrete, actionable steps. We look forward to working with our allies on this vital project.

Recommendations

The following recommendations represent thirty strategies OSSTF/FEESO urges Ontario's education community to implement for the sake of building safer schools now. The recommendations are organized here by who is best positioned to move them forward. Most will require collaborative efforts. Some are directed toward policy changes, whereas others focus on training, reporting processes, and best practices for intervening on disruptive and violent behaviour. Underpinning all of them is the need for increased, sustained, and predictable funding to counteract the damage created by years of underinvestment in public education.

Ministry of Education/Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training, and Skills Development

- The provincial government should recognize that violence in schools is reaching crisis proportions, and commit itself to making violence reduction and prevention an urgent priority. This will require properly funding violence reduction strategies as described in the remaining recommendations. (See Recommendation #1, page 23)

- The Minister of Labour should create a sector-specific regulation for the education sector under the Occupational Health and Safety Act that takes into account and addresses the unique nature of education workplaces. The regulation should include the requirement that school board workplace violence and prevention plans and programs must be developed in consultation with a multi-site Joint Health and Safety Committee. (See Recommendation #8, page 40)

- The Minister of Labour should amend the Occupational Health and Safety Act to require school boards to establish and maintain multi-site Joint Health and Safety Committees. (See Recommendation #11, page 40)

- The Minister of Labour should establish a provincial advisory committee for the education sector as permitted under section 21 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act. (See Recommendation #9, page 40)

- To ensure consistent meeting of workplace safety obligations across education sector workplaces, the Ministry of Education should officially adopt the clear and more expansive definition of workplace violence provided by section 1(1) of the Occupation Health and Safety Act. The definition in OHSA should be updated to recognize physical harm that does not require medical attention, as well as psychological harm. The Ministry should then ensure that all school boards use and are accountable to the same definition. (See Recommendation #10, page 40)

- The Ministry of Education should develop a single, comprehensive, streamlined, and province-wide online reporting system to ensure uniformity and allow for the collection of data to better understand school violence and guide policy responses. (See Recommendation #41, page 38)

- The Minister of Education should further revise PPM 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct to explicitly

describe unwelcome behaviours. (See Recommendation #17, page 41)

- The Ministry of Labour should release data on the workplace violence inspection blitz of education worksites conducted in February and March 2023. (See Recommendation #2, page 23)

- The government should implement a dedicated tuition waiver to attract students into education programs for occupations experiencing shortages (education workers, professional student support personnel, etc.). Similar programs have already been introduced in the health care and long-term care sectors. (See Recommendation #7, page 29)

- The Ministry of Labour should annually publicize data collected through the online system along with the findings of any compliance initiative regarding workplace violence in the education sector. (See Recommendation #20, page 41)

- The Ministry of Education should accept and implement the Ontario Autism Coalition's recommendation to "create a policy statement regarding exclusion to ensure that all school boards consistently implement a specific standard and criteria for the appropriate exclusion of students from school property where warranted as a last resort."[2] (See Recommendation #23, page 47)

- The Minister of Education should create a multi-stakeholder task force to review and identify best practices related to progressive interventions. (See Recommendation #24, page 47)

- The Minister of Education should increase the ratio of education workers to students in the Core Education Funding so that schools and school boards can hire additional qualified staff, including mental health professionals, educational assistants, child and youth workers, and other education workers. (See Recommendation #25, page 47)

- The Minister of Education should expand funding and eligibility for safe school grants to allow school boards to hire additional qualified staff such as professional student support personnel, educational assistants, and other education workers into the public education system. (See Recommendation #26, page 47)

- The Minister of Education should create a multi-stakeholder Safe at School Action Table mandated to develop a comprehensive Safe at School Action Plan. (See Recommendation #28, page 50)

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Government and School Boards

- The Minister of Education should provide funding for and require school boards to provide comprehensive, mandatory training on OHSA to all school administrators with emphasis on the requirements of section 32.0.5 and the employer duties set out in that section. Such training should also make clear that OHSA requirements—except where the life, health, or safety of a student is in jeopardy—take priority over those of the Education Act. (See Recommendation #12, page 40)

- The Minister of Education should provide funding for and require school boards to provide comprehensive training on conflict resolution, de-escalation, and managing difficult behaviours for all workers and supervisors. (See Recommendation #13, page 40)

- The Ministry of Labour should provide enhanced and stable funding for Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, Prevention Link, the Workers Health and Safety Centre, and similar labour-led programs for union members to access high-quality health and safety training. (See Recommendation #15, page 40)

- The Minister of Education should mandate anti-bias training for administrators and others tasked with enforcing the code of conduct outlined in PPM 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct to ensure interventions are enacted in a consistent and unbiased manner. (See Recommendation #18, page 41)

- The Ministry of Education and school boards should adopt a public-health approach to understanding the origins of violence. (See Recommendation #3, page 23)

Unions

- Unions should continue to advocate and bargain for the Ministry of Education to provide unions with resources to renew and enhance union training on the right to refuse unsafe work. (See Recommendation #14, page 40)

- Unions should continue to advocate and bargain for the Ministry of Education to provide unions with resources to renew and enhance union training on mental and psychosocial health. (See Recommendation #6, page 29)

- Education sector unions should collaboratively develop and coordinate campaigns to advocate for system-level anti-violence measures and union-led strategies for combatting violence in the workplace. (See Recommendation #29, page 50)

Unions, School Boards, and Administrators	• Unions, school boards, and administrators should develop joint campaigns on building non-violent cultures in schools. (See Recommendation #4, page 23)
	• The Ministry of Education should require school boards to work with unions to develop joint campaigns to promote reporting violent incidents. (See Recommendation #21, page 41)
	• Unions, school boards, and administrators should collaboratively develop processes to follow up with students who have committed violent acts. These processes should be led by board-employed professional student support personnel such as child and youth workers and regulated health professionals (e.g., psychologists and social workers). (See Recommendation #22, page 47)
	• The parties under the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act should bargain collective agreement language that reflects greater transparency and accountability in efforts to reduce workplace violence and jointly develop processes designed to ensure that goal. (See Recommendation #30, page 50)
Multistakeholder	• The Ministry of Labour should lead a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder review of Workplace Violence in School Boards guidance document with a view to developing specific policy mechanisms capable of ensuring enforcement of the guide's requirements. (See Recommendation #16, page 41)
	• Stakeholders should jointly develop a shared and explicit recognition that a worker's mental or physical injury resulting from a workplace violence incident is a workplace injury. (See Recommendation #5, page 29)
	• The Ministry of Education, school boards, and unions should collaboratively develop a series of comprehensive, trauma-informed training programs on progressive interventions and non-violent crisis intervention. (See Recommendation #27, page 47)

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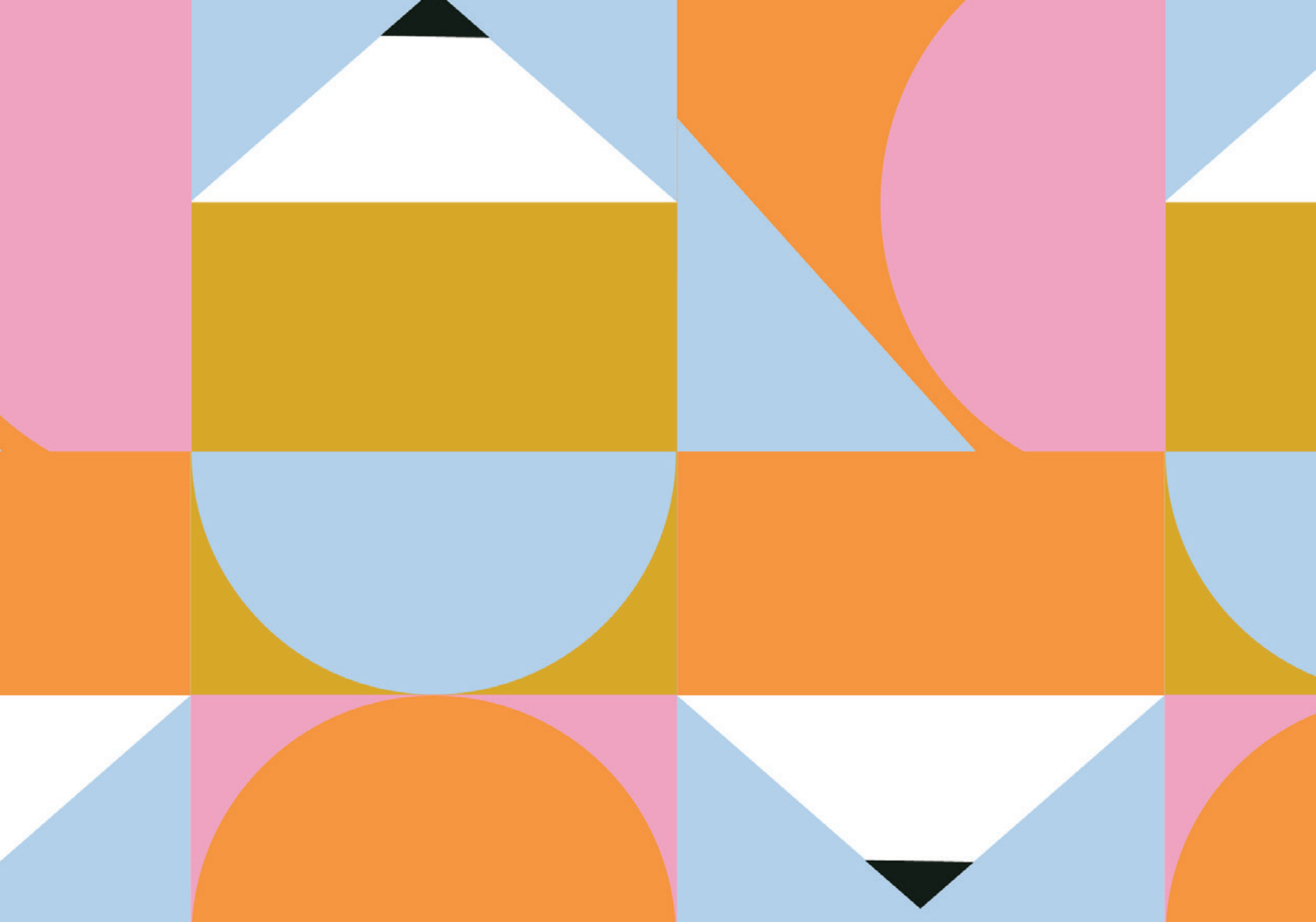
Part 1.
Introduction

Public education is a vital institution. It brings together students with diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, family structures, abilities, goals, and ambitions and asks them to share in the project of learning. It provides space and guidance for students to learn about themselves, their peers, and the world around them. This is a shared project, to which education workers, teachers, administrators, school boards, parents, and all other stakeholders are deeply committed. Teachers and education workers embody a commitment to care and to nurturing creativity, critical thinking, and learning across myriad subject areas.

For this educational project to work, students and staff alike must come to the learning environment ready to play their part. For too many students, teachers, and education workers, bullying, harassment, and other forms of violence make it nearly impossible to be in class and ready to learn. Teachers, education workers, and administrators want to build safe and nurturing environments, but find themselves constantly frustrated by the lack of resources and supports brought about by ongoing funding shortfalls. Teachers and education workers take every measure possible to proactively and, when necessary, reactively ensure student safety. But too often, when they seek help in doing so, none arrives. When they seek support for their own experiences of violence at school, they are left feeling blamed, isolated, and frustrated. This lack of resources does nothing to help students, and it contributes to challenges school boards across the province are having in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and education workers.

A key reason why resources are not available when needed is the fact that Ontario's public education system has suffered from chronic underfunding. Ontario ranks fifth among all provinces in its education spending and is spending $1,500 per student less now than it was in 2018-2019.[3] At the same time, the complexity of students' needs has increased. The combination of increasingly complex challenges and reduced funding creates a severe strain on staffing, classroom resources, and programs to support vulnerable students. Underfunding creates instability in the system and creates major barriers to providing students with the learning opportunities they deserve.

In 2023, OSSTF/FEESO commissioned Stratcom Communications Inc. (Stratcom) to study the experiences of violence among OSSTF/FEESO members in the K–12 education sector.[4] The study was modelled on a similar study commissioned by ETFO earlier in the same year. The findings of those surveys and related studies echo the analyses produced by conversations among unions, union members, and various stakeholders across the province. Our hope is that the discussion here can help build consensus in support of the thirty concrete, actionable recommendations described in this paper.

This paper and its recommendations were written to frame discussions at OSSTF/FEESO's Safe at School: Solutions to Workplace Violence summit held in January 2025, and to guide the actions that all stakeholders should take in addressing violence in schools. OSSTF/FEESO organized the summit to create an opportunity for public education supporters from across the province to weigh in on whether the recommendations are the right ones, which ones need to be adjusted, which ones scrapped, and which new recommendations should be added to the list.

In reflecting on the recommendations contained in this paper, the reader is encouraged to recognize that students exist in multiple contexts at once: they are students at school, members of families, and members of peer groups, they live in particular neighbourhoods, and they may participate in various

sporting, ethnic, religious, and shared-interest communities. For many students, these contexts are shaped by experiences of racism, poverty, social disconnection, and other system-level factors. Student behaviour and what students need in order to feel safe, nurtured, and ready to learn need to be understood as significantly influenced by the interaction between those contexts. It almost goes without saying at this point, but is nonetheless worth emphasizing, that we also are still grappling with the after-effects of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The evidence of declining mental health for people of all ages is everywhere. For students, this often translates into frustration, difficulty coping, and in some cases violent behaviour. Although violence often appears to be an individual phenomenon—the result of a student making bad choices—the reality is that violence is the product of system-level realities. The public education system should be ready to help students through these challenges. That is certainly the goal of teachers and education workers. But systemic problems need systemic responses, and that means having sufficient financial resources to ensure that sufficient staff, training, reporting and monitoring, and other supports are in place.

The recommendations contained in this report are intended to guide all stakeholders in identifying the resources needed to combat violence and the joint strategies necessary to effectively use those resources in support of high-quality public education.
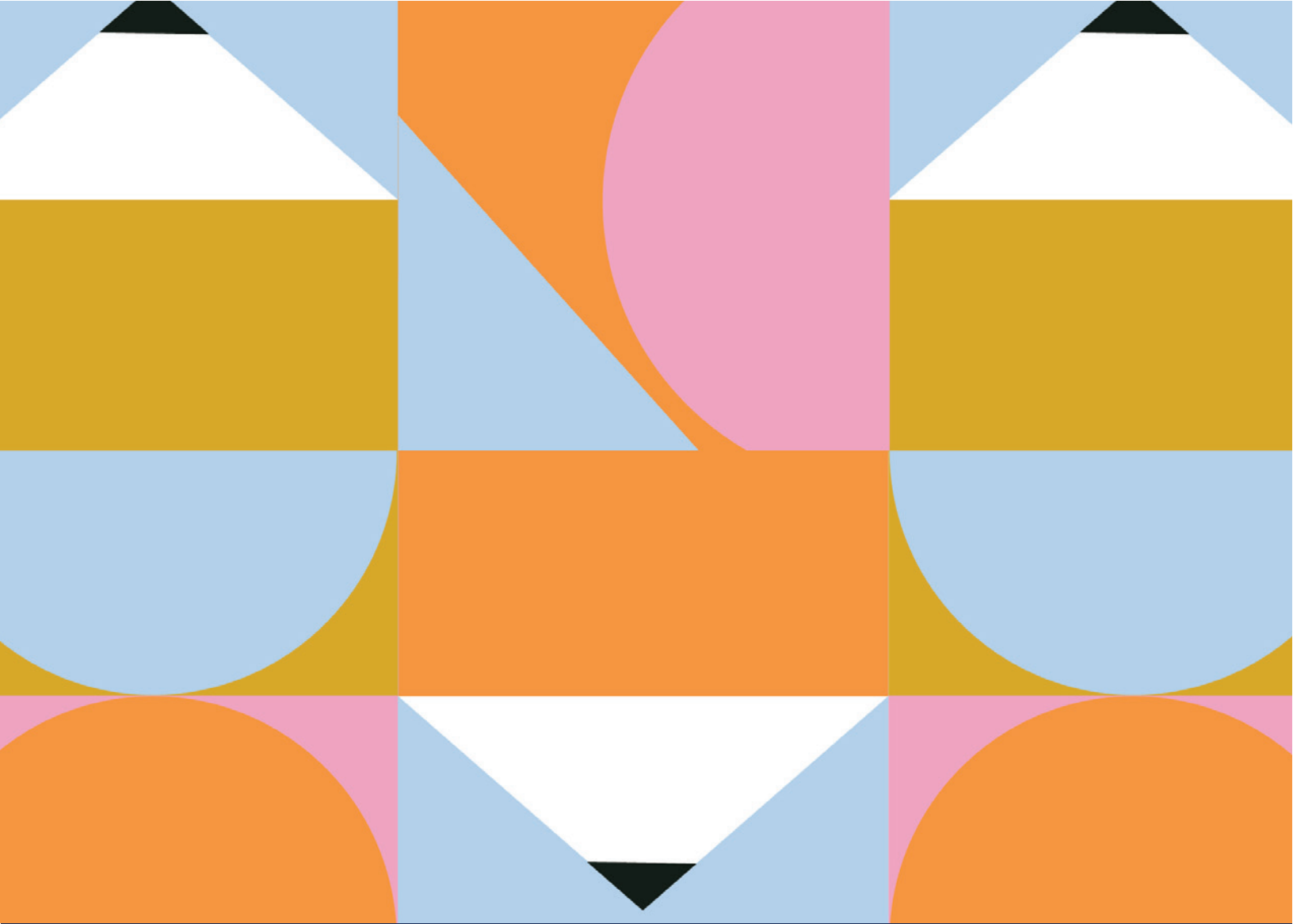
Part 2.
Incidence of Workplace Violence in Education

There is a tremendous amount to unpack when looking at incidents of violence in schools and other education worksites. It is a complex issue that manifests in myriad different ways in myriad different contexts. For simplicity's sake, this report distills questions of frequency into the following four questions.

What is the nature of violent incidents? **What kinds** of violence are **school employees** experiencing?

How often do violent incidents, including harassment and threats of violence, occur?

Who are the targets of violence and harassment?

Who are the perpetrators of violence and harassment?

Each of these questions inevitably leads to bigger questions, not only around the impacts of violence on individuals and school communities, but also around how to prevent and respond to violence.

What is the nature of violent incidents? What kinds of violence are school employees experiencing?

The definitions of violence used in most research on this issue, particularly the definitions found in OHSA (see part 4 of this paper) are important because they provide a shared understanding of what constitutes violence and how to recognize and name harassment, threats, and other problematic behaviour. However, the legalistic phrasing of such definitions—"the exercise of physical force by a person," "a course of vexatious comment or conduct"—risks missing the visceral, lived experience of violence. Education workers and teachers choose their professions because they care about the well-being of the students in their care. Violence in the face of such a commitment to care is more than an exercise or simply vexatious; it is physically and mentally hurtful. Santor and his colleagues provide a chilling summary of the types of violence teachers and education workers face:

- death threats
- threats with weapons (knives, scissors, glass shards, razors, school supplies, furniture, fists)
- being punched, elbowed, pushed, slapped, bitten, hit, kicked, spat on, chased, grabbed, shoved, scratched, headbutted, kneed, pinched, tripped, knocked down, jumped on, stabbed, and having objects thrown at them
- verbal abuse
- having classrooms "trashed" [5]

Santor et al.'s description of the type of violence experienced by education workers was confirmed in Stratcom's research with OSSTF/FEESO members.

For permanent and occasional teachers violence largely occurs in the form of verbal abuse, bullying, and harassment by secondary school students. Verbal abuse includes not just the daily levying of misogynistic or offensive language, but actual threats to educator's physical safety and in some cases, lives.[6]

Physical violence, when it is aimed at teachers and education workers includes biting, hitting, kicking, and the use of physical objects and furniture to inflict harm on staff.

Violence has resulted in concussions and other injuries and have been serious enough to require emergency medical care.[7]

These results convey the gravity and severity of the nature of violence being experienced by many education workers and teachers across the province.

How often do violent incidents, including harassment and threats of violence, occur?

As visceral as the descriptions of violence are, the frequency is equally concerning. Just listen to the people working in the system. Approximately half of education staff surveyed (48% of OSSTF/FEESO members and 54% of ETFO members) told researchers that violence was a serious problem in the previous school year.[8]

Among OSSTF/FEESO members:

- 31% reported experiencing at least one incident of actual physical violence (including 63% of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs), 70% of Child and Youth Workers (CYWs), and 75% of Educational Assistants (EAs)
- 38% reported experiencing at least one attempt of the use of physical force (including 65% of ECEs, 75% of CYWs, and 78% of EAs)
- 52% reported experiencing at least one threat of physical force (including 60% of ECEs, 76% of CYWs, and 77% of EAs).[9]

Of course, for many teachers and education workers who experience violence, that violence does not occur as an isolated incident. As Table 1 shows, nearly one in ten secondary teachers and education workers in elementary and secondary schools experienced more than ten acts of physical violence in the previous year, with attempts at violence and threats of violence occurring even more frequently.

Table 1. Frequency of Violent Incidents against staff [10]

	EXPERIENCED **ACTUAL** PHYSICAL FORCE		
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS	1-10 TIMES IN 2022-2023	11-20 TIMES IN 2022-2023	MORE THAN 21 TIMES IN 2022-2023
ETFO	36%	5%	4%
OSSTF/FEESO	22%	4%	5%

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EXPERIENCED AN **ATTEMPT** AT PHYSICAL VIOLENCE			
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS	1-10 TIMES IN 2022-2023	11-20 TIMES IN 2022-2023	MORE THAN 21 TIMES IN 2022-2023
ETFO	40%	7%	6%
OSSTF/FEESO	26%	4%	7%

EXPERIENCED A **THREAT** OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE			
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS	1-10 TIMES IN 2022-2023	11-20 TIMES IN 2022-2023	MORE THAN 21 TIMES IN 2022-2023
ETFO	44%	8%	6%
OSSTF/FEESO	39%	6%	7%

Education workers are particularly exposed to violence. An upcoming report from researchers associated with the Healthy Professional Workers study found that 39.3% of education workers reported experiencing violence at least once a year. This finding is very similar to Stratcom's findings in their recent survey of ETFO members, with 44% of education workers reporting that they had experienced violence in the previous year.[11]

It is worth emphasizing that there are also high rates of witnessing acts of violence both against other teachers and education workers and between students. These are less likely to lead to immediately visible outcomes, such as lost-time claims, but they can nonetheless have lasting negative psychological impacts. Among OSSTF/FEESO members in the K-12 sector:

59% witnessed a **threat** of physical violence against another staff member

43% witnessed an **attempt** at physical force against another staff member

36% witnessed **actual** physical force against another member[12]

Most concerningly, the problem is getting worse. Researchers and policy-makers are paying close attention to changes in behaviour since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, looking for evidence confirming the common hypothesis that the reduced opportunities for learning social skills during lockdowns led to increases in problematic behaviour in the years since schools reopened. For example, a recent study from researchers at Brock University found that "classroom incivility in both children and adolescents has increased as a result of pandemic-related school shutdowns in 2020-2021.[13] A study in the United States found that rates of verbal and physical aggression were reduced during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and then increased following the pandemic. Based on the researchers' findings, they speculate that "learning losses and teacher shortages that resulted from the pandemic may have contributed to worsening conditions after COVID-19 restrictions."[14] Stratcom's findings also reflect this trend.

- Nearly seven in ten OSSTF/FEESO members (69%) said that the number of incidents of violence against teachers and education workers in the Ontario public school system has increased since before the pandemic.
- This includes 36% who believe incidents of violence have "increased a great deal."[15]

It is impossible at this point to unpack what exactly is causing these changes and whether current trends will continue. However, there is a growing consensus that a combination of COVID-related social isolation and ever-diminishing staffing and other resources are working together to make schools less safe for students, teachers, and education workers.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that COVID-19 does not explain violence on its own. Three-quarters (75%) of OSSTF/FEESO members who participated in Stratcom's survey reported that there are more incidents of violence now than when they began their careers in the Ontario public school system. This includes:

- 80% of education assistants
- 79% of child and youth workers
- 78% of permanent teachers,
- 73% of early childhood educators, and 65% of occasional Teachers.[16]

The number of teachers and education workers who report an increase in violence over the course of their careers rises to 80% among members of ETFO.[17] Again, this result conforms with the findings of other researchers, such as Santor et al., who note a seven-fold increase in violence against teachers and education workers over the past twelve years. They contrast their research, which found 54% of respondents had experienced violence, to a 2005 study in which that number was only 7%.[18]

We don't need to rely entirely on self-reported data to confirm this trend. Figure 1 uses board-reported data to demonstrate the upward trend of violent incidents. Notwithstanding the years with COVID-19 school closures, such incidents have consistently increased from 1,721 in the 2013-2014 school year to 3,932 in the 2022-2023 school year.[19]

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Figure 1. Violent incidents in schools [20]

Number of violent incidents as reported by boards
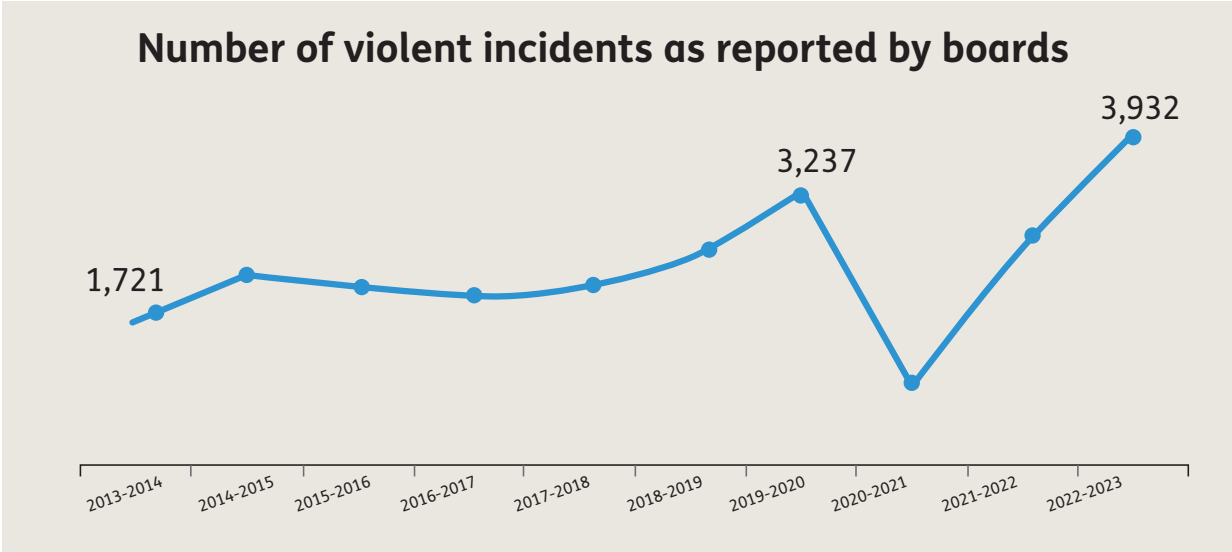
Note that this trend holds even when adjusted for growth in enrolment, rising from a rate of 0.09% in 2013-2014 to 0.15% in 2022-2023.

Similar trends can be found in Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) lost-time injury claims. Even when calculated as a percentage using full-time equivalent (FTE) data, the increase in lost-time claims is clear and follows the trajectory of board-reported violent incidents.

Figure 2. Lost-time claims due to workplace violence [21]

Lost–time workplace violence claims: percentage of FTE
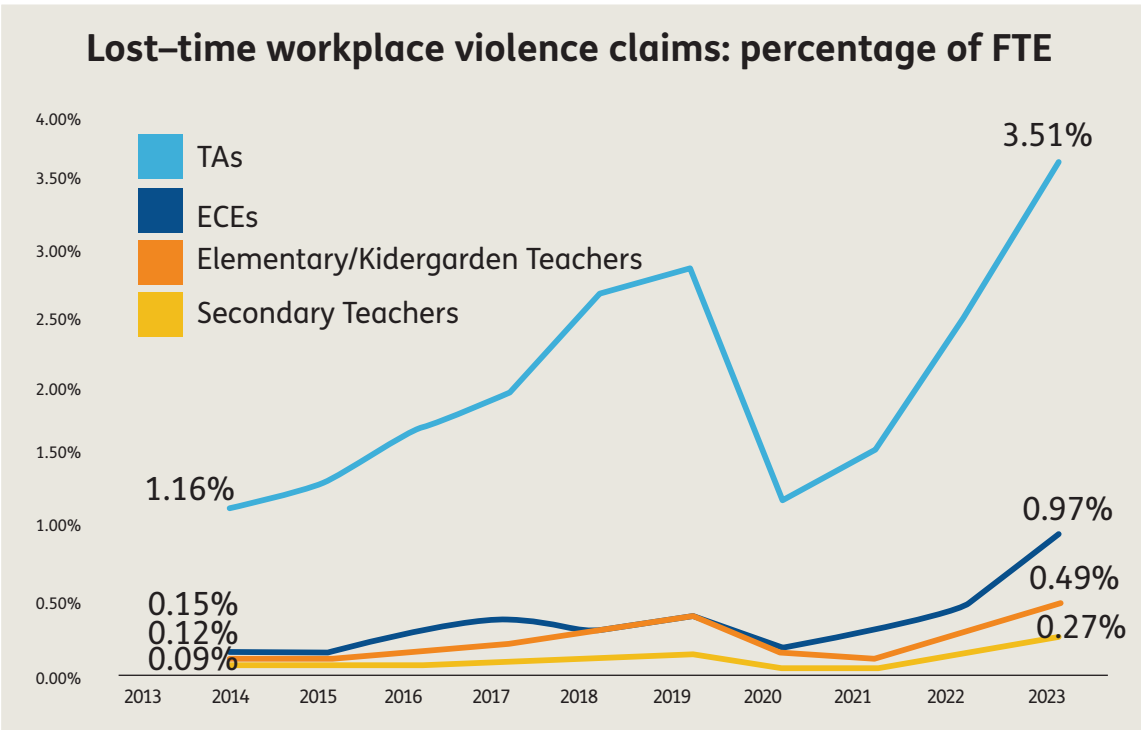
The decade-long trend toward increased experiences of violence means the problem of increasing levels of violence predates COVID-19 and cannot be entirely accounted for by lockdowns and pandemic-related school closures.

Despite the evidence presented here, it is difficult to obtain relevant data from the Education and Labour Ministries. For example, in February and March of 2023, the Ministry of Labour undertook a workplace violence inspection blitz across education worksites. The initiative was intended to ensure that school boards are complying with the requirements set out in OHSA, as well as to raise awareness about workplace violence. In the past, detailed results from the inspections have been shared with the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety (PWGHS). Sharing this type of information allows all stakeholders to work together to identify strategies and solutions for addressing violence in the workplace. However, after the 2023 round of inspections, the PWGHS was given only a cursory summary. Detailed results from the inspections remain unavailable. Vital data on the prevalence and nature of violence and efforts to counter those trends to ensure student and worker safety should be shared with all stakeholders as a matter of course.

Who are the targets of violence and harassment?

As noted above, education workers, particularly ECEs, CYWs, and EAs, are more likely to experience violence and harassment from students compared to other groups. This general trend is confirmed by other research as well. [22] Beyond differences based on job classification, there is good evidence that workplace violence disproportionately affects women, racialized people, people with disabilities, and Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual (2SLGBTQIA+) people.

For example, Stratcom's survey of OSSTF/FEESO members in the K-12 sector found that women experience violence and harassment from students more often than their male counterparts: 35% of female members were personally subjected to physical force compared to 20% of male members.[23] Research based on WSIB data by Chen et al. similarly found that from 2002 to 2015, the "relative risk of compensation claims for injury attributed to violence was consistently higher for women than for men."[24] According to more recent WSIB data, 91% of successful lost-time claimants in 2023 were women.[25]

These disparities are likely due to the twofold way in which violence within public education is gendered. First, women make up the majority of the workers in classifications more likely to experience violence. For example, according to Stratcom, three-quarters of EAs (75%) report having had physical force used against them in the 2022-2023 school year, and 89% of EAs identify as female. [26]

Second, the nature of the violence itself is also gendered. One OSSTF/FEESO member in a focus group observed:

> It is almost exclusively happening to female teachers. I am 6 foot 2 and over 200 pounds... In [more than 20] years, I have experienced maybe one thing that can be construed as a threat. But my colleague two doors down is five feet tall and on a regular basis she has stories of pretty horrific things that people say to her... A person's physical presence does make a difference when it comes to these interactions. [27]

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However, the problem goes beyond differences in physical stature. As already noted, when students engage in verbal harassment, they often levy misogynistic tropes. That is, highly gendered, anti-women insults are readily available from the general discourse.

> Harassment and violence against elementary school educators is gendered violence. Not only are upwards of 85% of these workers women but gender is evident in the nature of the violence (language deployed, the mobilization of gendered tropes, microaggressions, and sexual harassment) and in the institutional response including the routine responsibilizing and blaming of educators for the harassment and violence they experience.[28]

In addition, Santor et al. found that educators in the elementary panel who identify as racialized, disabled, women, or 2SLGBTQIA+ experienced higher rates of harassment and violence from students. Teachers and education workers who are racialized, disabled, and/or women also experienced higher rates of harassment and violence from colleagues. An earlier study, commissioned by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) to look at education workers, found many of the same patterns.[29]

This was reflected in rates of violence reported to Stratcom's survey of OSSTF/FEESO members. As Table 2 shows, women and people with a disability were more likely than average to report experiencing actual, attempted, and threatened acts of violence.

Table 2. Actual, attempted, and threatened acts of violence[30]

EXPERIENCES OF…	AVERAGE	WOMEN	PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY
A threat of physical force	52%	53%	61%
An attempt at physical force	38%	41%	43%
Actual physical force	31%	35%	35%

To address violence in schools, we need to take into consideration the diverse experiences of teachers and education workers, which particularly vary by job classification and social identity. This is particularly urgent as stakeholders across the system grapple with how to increase the diversity of Ontario's education workforce. Challenges related to recruitment and retention already pervade the system, and the disproportionate experiences of violence and harassment against equity-seeking groups undermines efforts to build a more diverse education team.

Who are the perpetrators of violence and harassment?

To understand the kinds of violence teachers and education workers experience and who is more likely to be exposed to the risk of violence, it is essential to understand who is likely to engage in different

types of violent behaviour. For example, some research shows that classroom-based workers (such as EAs, ECEs, library workers, and teachers) are more likely to experience harassment from students.[31] Other research confirms this, with Ferguson et al. finding that 95% of the violent incidents reported in their study came from students.[32]

Billaudeau et al. found that across Canada (outside Quebec) the majority of incidents of violence came from students, but with a significant amount coming from parents and colleagues.

Table 3. Have you experienced violence from the following? (% 'yes') [33]

Category	%
Pupils	84%
Parents	29%
Staff	25%
Persons external to the school	8%

These findings make intuitive sense in that teachers and education workers, with the notable exception of office staff, have considerably more contact with students than with parents. However, student populations are incredibly diverse, and the causes of violent behaviour are complex. This means that prevention, mitigation, and remediation strategies need to account for these factors. OSSTF/FEESO therefore urges a public-health approach to understanding when and why some people enact violence on others and to identify system-level interventions to prevent and mitigate the effects of those behaviours. More specifically, we envision an approach similar to those that focus on the social determinants in health. Within public-health discourse, social determinants of health are those things that are non-medical in nature but still affect health outcomes. Such factors typically include income, food insecurity, social inclusion/non-discrimination, and education.[34] In the context of understanding what leads to violence and harassment, we should pay attention to factors including poverty and economic stress, housing, access to community services, and levels of social inclusion/exclusion.

Research and consultation on a public-health approach to school violence should then be articulated into a joint campaign, sponsored by unions and school boards, on building non-violent school cultures. This campaign could raise awareness about social factors, the system-level changes that are needed to address those factors, and the mitigation strategies that can be implemented within school settings.

Incidence of Violence: Recommendations

1. The provincial government should recognize that violence in schools is reaching crisis proportions, and commit itself to making violence reduction and prevention an urgent priority. This will require properly funding violence reduction strategies as described in the remaining recommendations.

2. The Ministry of Labour should release data on the workplace violence inspection blitz of education worksites conducted in February and March 2023.

3. The Ministry of Education and school boards should adopt a public-health approach to understanding the origins of violence.

4. Unions, school boards, and administrators should develop joint campaigns on building non-violent school cultures.
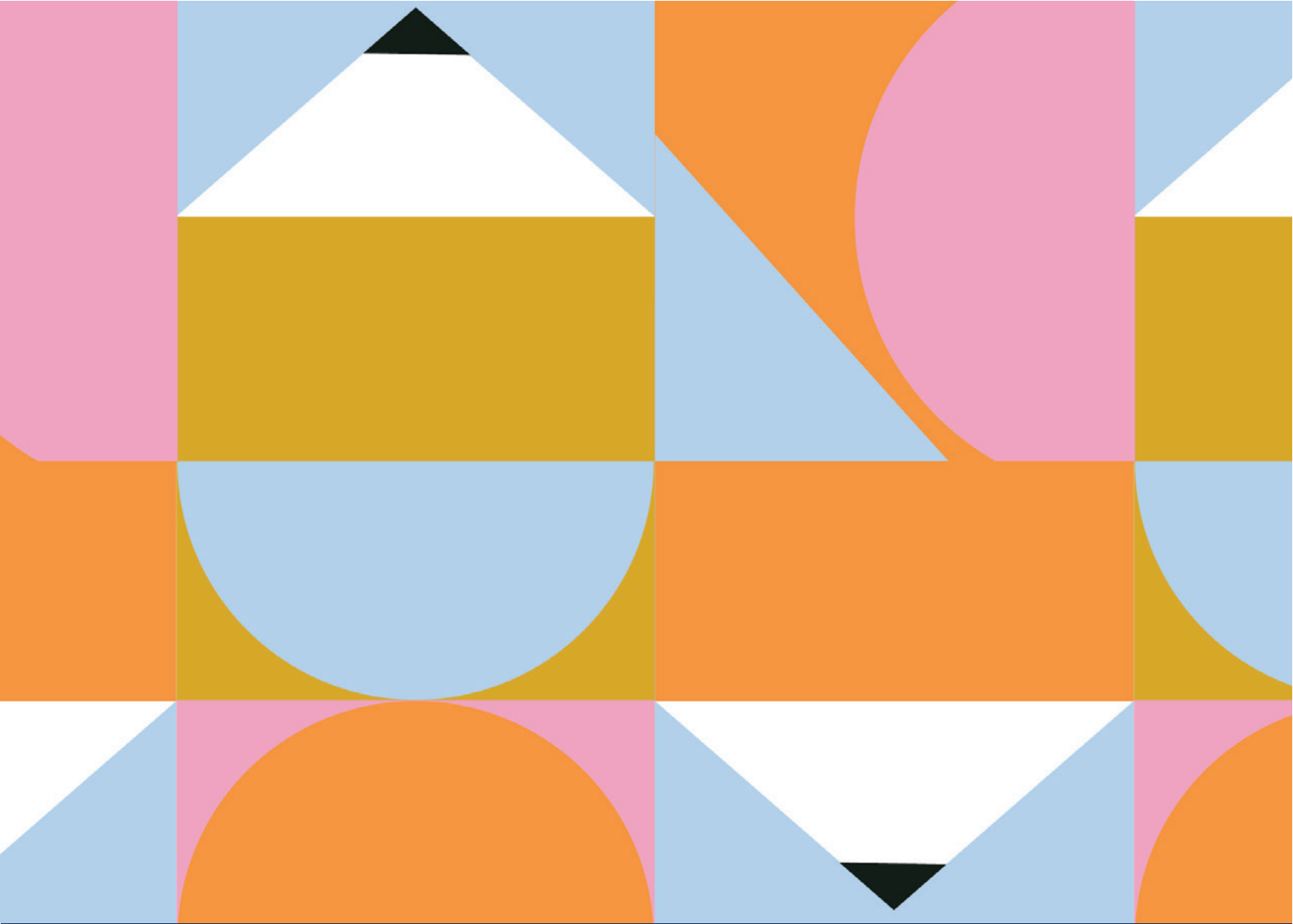
Prevention   Awareness   Resources   Interventions

Part 3.
Impacts and Outcomes

Although the data on how often violence occurs are clear, they do not tell the whole story. It is also necessary to look at what violence actually means. That is, what the impacts of violence are on students, classrooms, and education staff.

Violence has obvious impacts on the individual in terms of mental, physical, and professional well-being. It also introduces unnecessary costs and inefficiencies into a system where everyone involved would prefer to focus on learning. A non-exhaustive list of the impacts of violence includes:

- lost time / lost wages
- increased time off and reliance on occasional teachers
- potential litigation costs
- lost instructional time
- negative publicity
- negative student behavioural and academic outcomes
- occupational burnout
- negative impact on family life
- mental and emotional injury or illness, including heightened anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating[35]

The rate of allowed lost-time claims made through WSIB helps illustrate the extent of the problem. According to WSIB data, there were 1,739 successful lost-time claims in 2023. These claims cost a total of $3,642,113.[36] Because exposure to workplace violence is highly gendered and varies according to job class, the frequency with which workers have to access WSIB benefits following a violent incident also varies. Figure 3 graphically illustrates the extent to which women are accessing WSIB benefits following workplace violence.[37]

Figure 3. Allowed lost-time claims: gender[38]
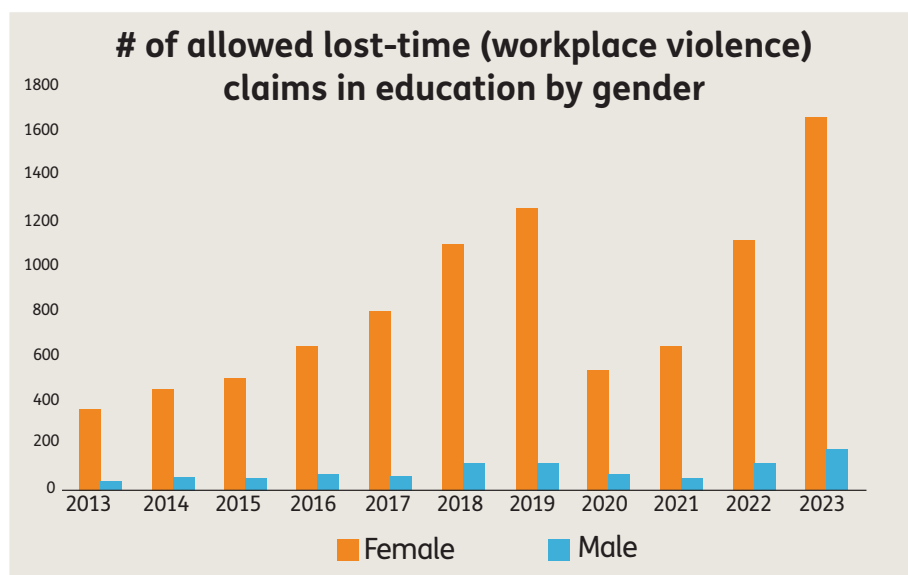
Similarly, Figure 4 shows that educational assistants and elementary/kindergarten teachers are more likely to require lost-time compensation following workplace violence.

Figure 4. Allowed lost-time claims: occupation [39]

% of allowed lost-time (workplace violence) claims by occupation
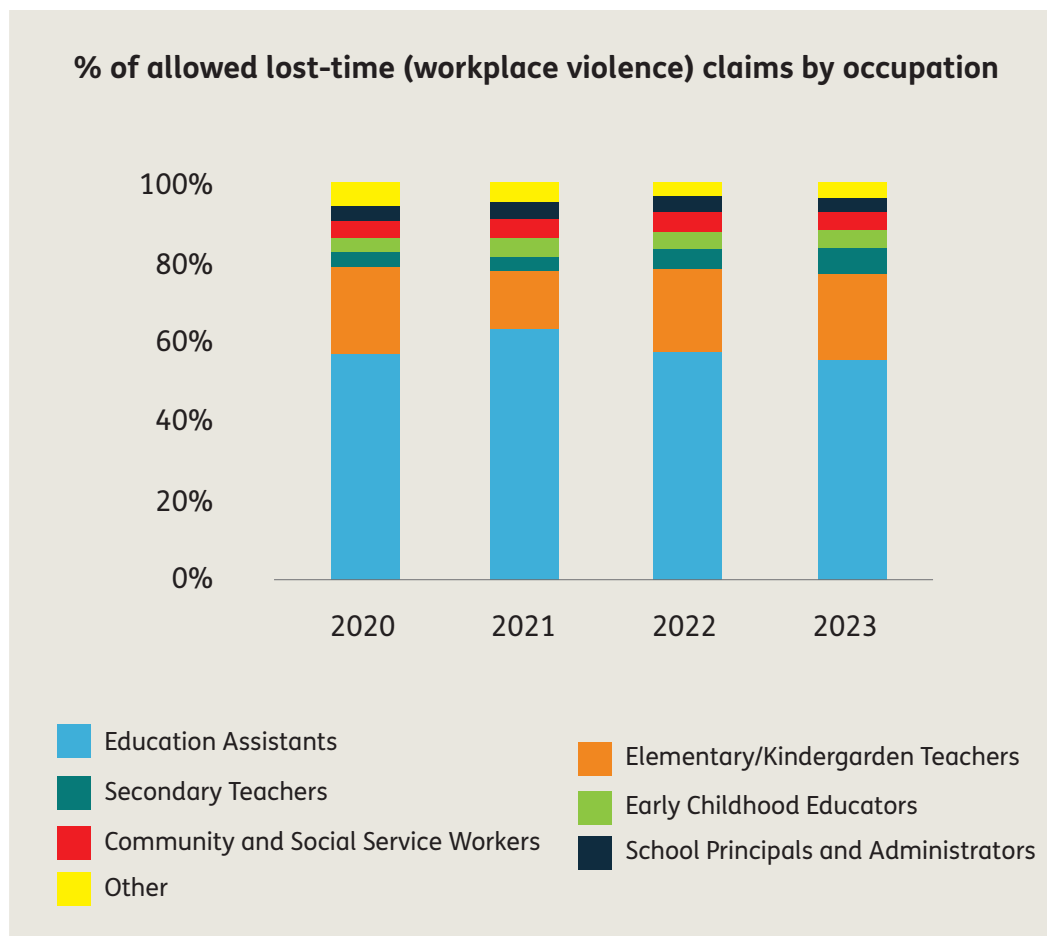
It is essential to note, however, that WSIB lost-time claims do not provide a complete picture of the impact of workplace violence. Many forms of harm do not result in immediate time away from work. Psychological illness resulting from experiencing or witnessing violence and harassment may not lead to a lost-time claim, but it has clear implications for personal and professional well-being. Indeed, mental distress is commonly reported in research on the subject. Ferguson et al., for example, found that workers who experience violence are almost twice as likely as their colleagues to report a mental health issue, even when taking into account other factors such as gender, job classification, and working conditions during the pandemic. [40] This accords with other research, such as Olivier et al.'s 2021 study, which found that exposure to student aggression predicted experiences of chronic (rather than sporadic) exhaustion among teachers.[41] It is essential, therefore, that unions, school boards, and the Ministry develop a shared and explicit recognition that a worker's mental injury is a workplace injury. This recognition would support workers when they need to access WSIB benefits for time away from work to recover.

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These diverse, often hidden, forms of harm impact family life, work-life balance, personal relationships, and, as discussed below, professional well-being. [42] In light of those impacts, it is incumbent on unions to expand upon and continue the education they are already providing their members on mental and psychosocial health.

Professional Impact

An experience of violence can have a lasting impact. As one Stratcom study participant put it:

> *"For the first time in my years as an educator, I dreaded coming to work every day. I was starting to have severe anxiety and heart palpitations."*[43]

It is impossible to imagine that violence resulting in physical or mental injury would not impact a person's work life. In Stratcom's survey of OSSTF/FEESO members, 79% indicated that the increase in violence makes teaching and working with students more difficult. Among ETFO members the rate was even higher.

Table 4. Impact of violence [44]

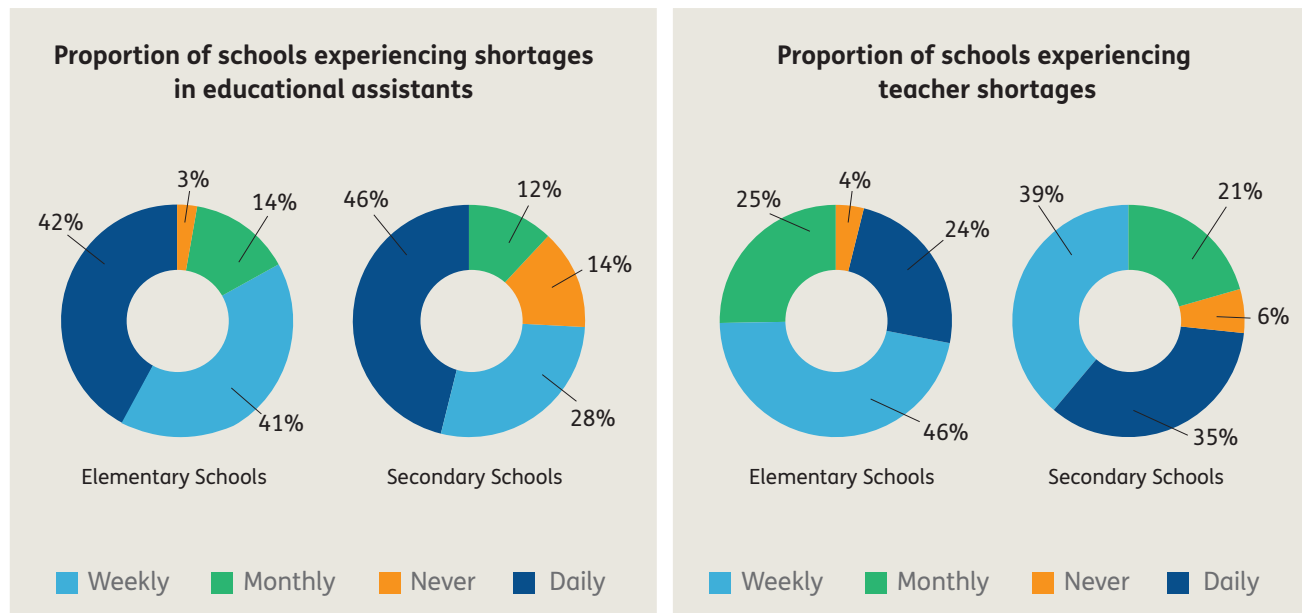|	ETFO	OSSTF/FEESO
Violence in my school(s) makes teaching/working with students more difficult.	87%	79%
Violence in my school(s) often interferes with classroom management.	83%	70%

For most teachers and education workers, violence has impacts beyond personal well-being and barriers to doing their job: it ultimately adds to their workload. When a teacher or educator is off because of an injury, their work does not disappear. Having someone fill in absorbs some of the pressure, but most teachers and education workers will tell you that being absent creates additional work. As Santor et al. summarize:

> In relation to violence in particular, we see increased workload associated not only with managing potentially volatile classroom situations but also with the need to develop contingency lesson plans (in case a crisis disrupts the planned activities) and deal with the aftermath of violence, including filling out forms, collaborating with colleagues and administrators to develop/revise safety plans, and cleaning up classrooms that have been damaged or destroyed. [45]

Although formal research is emerging, anecdotally, the personal and professional impacts of violence adversely affect recruitment, which is a growing problem in Ontario. Over the last several years, there have been multiple media and research reports on issues of recruitment and retention across the

province. For example, in its 2023-2024 annual survey of school administrators, People for Education found that shortages of teachers are a daily reality for more than a quarter of Ontario schools, and educational assistant shortages are a daily reality for almost half. [46]

Figure 5. Educational assistant and teacher shortages [47]

Proportion of schools experiencing shortages in educational assistants

Elementary Schools: 42%, 3%, 14%, 41%
Secondary Schools: 46%, 12%, 14%, 28%

Legend: Weekly, Monthly, Never, Daily

Proportion of schools experiencing teacher shortages

Elementary Schools: 25%, 4%, 24%, 46%
Secondary Schools: 39%, 21%, 6%, 35%

Legend: Weekly, Monthly, Never, Daily

During focus groups with Stratcom, some OSSTF/FEESO teachers and education workers indicated that they were considering leaving the profession due to multiple sources of stress, including violence. Indeed, they told researchers that a combination of low pay and exposure to violence was not only untenable, but it meant their school boards were having trouble recruiting qualified professionals. [48] These dynamics were also found by Ferguson et al., who note that "experiencing violence predicted considering leaving the organization and leaving the profession."[49]

In light of this reality, steps need to be taken to promote recruitment and retention among education workers, particularly in classifications where schools struggle the most to fill vacancies. OSSTF/FEESO is calling for the government to instate a dedicated "stay and learn" program for targeted occupations to attract students into those professions. The cornerstone of this program would be a dedicated tuition waiver to attract students into programs for education worker occupations that are experiencing shortages (for example, EAs). Similar programs have been introduced to address staff shortages in health care and the long-term care sector.

Impacts on Students

Ultimately, violence in schools affects students as much as teachers and education workers. This is true even when students witness violence that is directed toward teachers and education workers.

A study recently published in Saskatchewan makes the connection explicit. The authors of that study

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point to three ways in which students are impacted by violence.

1. Access to instruction. Teachers and educators cannot do their best work when they are hypervigilant about potential outbursts. Students also miss out on valuable instructional time when a classroom needs to be evacuated.

2. Emotional well-being. Witnessing acts of violence on other students, teachers, and education workers can be deeply destabilizing for students, particularly if they become routine events. Students become fearful and can themselves become hypervigilant.

3. Capacity to learn. The two impacts described above ultimately affect students' ability to absorb new information, their levels of engagement and, ultimately, academic achievement.[50]

In light of the personal, professional, and learning impacts of violence on students, teachers, and education workers, a coordinated approach is needed to recognize experiences of violence as injuries. Unions play a key role in training members to recognize violence as injurious and to avoid downplaying the impact it has on their personal and professional well-being. Given the particular impact on education workers and the resulting impact on recruitment and retention, targeted efforts are also needed to support newcomers to the profession. This means providing access to educational opportunities to facilitate entering these professions and adequate support for workers within the public system.
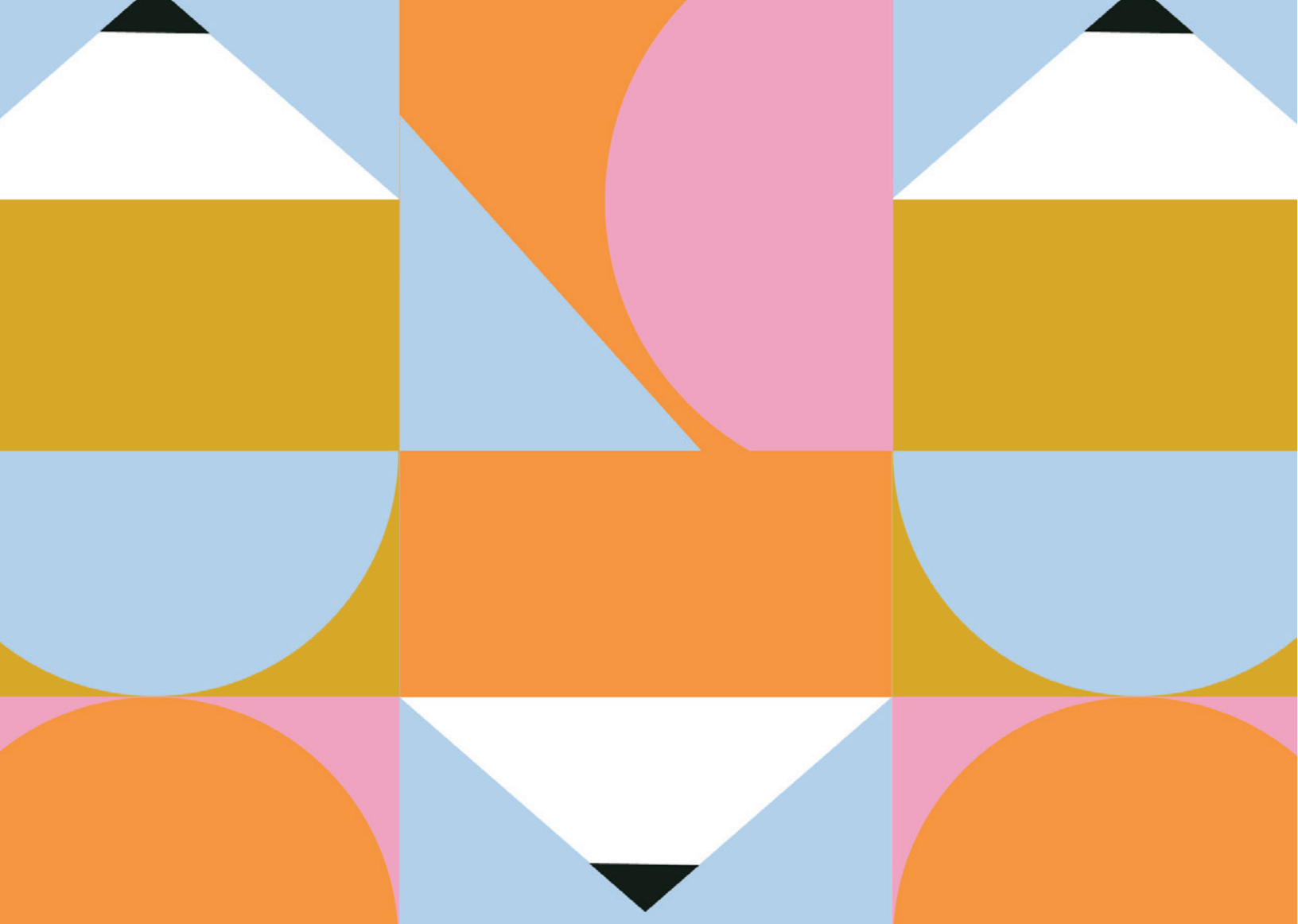
Impacts and Outcomes: Recommendations

5. Stakeholders should jointly develop a shared and explicit recognition that a worker's mental or physical injury resulting from a workplace violence incident is a workplace injury.

6. Unions should continue to advocate and bargain for the Ministry of Education to provide unions with resources to renew and enhance union training on mental and psychosocial health.

7. The government should implement a dedicated tuition waiver to attract students into education programs for occupations experiencing shortages (education workers, professional student support personnel, etc.). Similar programs have already been introduced in the health care and long-term care sectors.

■ Prevention　　■ Awareness　　■ Resources　　■ Interventions

Part 4.
The Legislative and Policy Context

Safer Schools Now—OSSTF/FEESO Policy Paper on Building Safer School Communities

OSSTF/FEESO

Workplace health and safety is a shared responsibility. In the context of creating safer schools specifically, the Minister of Education is responsible for ensuring that clear and actionable legislative and policy frameworks exist to protect the entire school community. School boards and administrators are responsible for implementing policy guidance and ensuring that clear procedures for preventing and responding to violent incidents are not only in place, but that those procedures are properly followed. In turn, teachers and education workers must do their part to follow established safety plans and procedures and to report through the appropriate mechanisms whenever violence occurs.

Despite this shared responsibility, much of the recent research on violence in Ontario's public education system shows that teachers and education workers feel unsupported and unable to access relevant information. In many cases, their concerns about violence are dismissed as unserious, as their own fault, as part of the job, or as evidence of their own lack of resilience.[51] Indeed, a recent arbitration in New Brunswick found that employers do in fact have a duty to provide adequate resources and supports to meet the requirements of relevant health and safety legislation.[52]

As a starting point, schools can be made safer by ensuring that everyone working in the system— from teachers and education workers to the Minister of Education—has clarity about what violence looks like, the strategies in place for preventing violence, and the actions that need to be taken when violence occurs. Such clarity needs to extend to the roles, rights, and responsibilities of everyone involved. Moreover, sufficient resources and infrastructure need to be in place to make the procedures and strategies effective.

This section provides a brief overview of the relevant legal and policy context in which teachers and education workers work, with specific focus on key elements related to workplace violence. These elements include the accepted definitions of what constitutes violence, roles and responsibilities for everyone involved, and the guidance provided to boards, administrators, teachers, and education workers.

The Occupational Health and Safety Act

Introduction

The foundational legislation for establishing a framework for safe workplaces in Ontario is the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA). In the education sector, other laws, such as the Education Act, Ryan's Law (Ensuring Asthma Friendly Schools), and Sabrina's Law, provide guidance on how to ensure schools and other education sites are safe and productive spaces for students and the entire school community.[53] OHSA is fundamental; it establishes the requirement for employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace. The Education Act works with OHSA to ensure workers are provided a safe workplace and students are provided a safe and nurturing environment in which to learn.[54]

Given how common it is for school administrators, teachers, and education workers alike to be unfamiliar with how OHSA and the Education Act interact, the Minister of Labour should enact a sector-specific regulation under OHSA. Similar regulations already exist for the health care sector and industrial worksites. Sector-specific regulations are beneficial because they recognize the unique

needs and challenges of particular types of workplaces. In the case of education, an OHSA regulation would provide clarity and guidance on how to ensure that students and workers alike are to be kept safe at school. More specifically, the regulation should require that every joint health and safety committee (JHSC) be provided access to the following:

- Safety plans and transition plans
- Workplace violence investigation reports
- Behavioural support plans and threat assessments
- Principal's investigations
- Progressive discipline logs
- Case conference forms
- Individual education plans
- Employee's Report of a Workplace Violent Incident
- Supervisor's Report of a Workplace Violent Incident
- Supervisor's Accident Investigation Reports
- Safe School Incident Reporting forms
- Part VII Notices under the Occupational Health and Safety Act

In addition, the Minister of Labour should establish an education sector committee under section 21 of OHSA. A section 21 committee would bring together representatives from unions and school boards to provide the relevant ministries with sector-specific advice on health and safety, including advice on violence. The committee would also be empowered to develop and distribute guidance documents to support boards and schools in implementing anti-violence strategies.

Definitions

Section 1(1) of OHSA provides the following definitions, which are central to understanding and addressing violence in schools:

Workplace violence:

(a) the exercise of physical force by a person against a worker, in a workplace, that causes or could cause physical injury to the worker,

(b) an attempt to exercise physical force against a worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker,

(c) a statement or behaviour that it is reasonable for a worker to interpret as a threat to exercise physical force against the worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker.

Workplace harassment:

(a) engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace, including virtually through the use of information and communications technology, that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome, or

(b) workplace sexual harassment.

Workplace sexual harassment:

(a) engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace, including virtually through the use of information and communications technology, because of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, where the course of comment or conduct is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome, or

(b) making a sexual solicitation or advance where the person making the solicitation or advance is in a position to confer, grant or deny a benefit or advancement to the worker and the person knows or ought reasonably to know that the solicitation or advance is unwelcome.

Unfortunately, the Ministry of Education has not officially adopted the OHSA definition for its policy documents. This leads to confusion and uncertainty about the relationship between OHSA and the Education Act for many school board employees. For example, PPM 120, which sets out responsibilities for reporting violent incidents to the Ministry of Education, uses a definition of violent incident that is taken from the Ministry's Provincial Model for a Local Police / School Board Protocol, 2011 and not from OHSA.[55] As a result, the Ministry does not require that school boards also adopt the OHSA definition as the standard. This fosters inconsistent application of the OHSA definition and undercuts appropriate action based on that definition. Therefore, all stakeholders, from the Ministry to schools, should have an established practice of relying on the OHSA definition of workplace violence, and that definition should be expanded to recognize physical harm that does not require medical attention, as well as psychological harm.

Three rights

In addition to establishing definitions of violence, OHSA establishes a series of rights and responsibilities for workers and employers. For workers, the Act provides for three essential rights: the right to participate, the right to know, and the right to refuse unsafe work.

The Right to Participate

The right to participate is established in sections 8 and 9 of the OHSA; it requires employers to work with a worker-selected individual or committee to promote safe workplaces. In most education worksites, this will involve a joint health and safety committee comprised of employer and worker representatives. Where a worker belongs to a union, they are represented by a union-appointed or elected representative. A core duty of worker members of the JHSC is to undertake monthly workplace inspections, identify and discuss potential hazards and other safety concerns, and work collaboratively to address those concerns. Although each workplace is already required to have a JHSC under OHSA, the Minister of Labour should also amend OHSA to require school boards to create multi-site JHSCs. By incorporating representation from multiple sites, the board-level JHSCs would be better positioned to identify common challenges and implement system-level responses.

The Right to Know

OHSA also establishes a worker's right to know about potential dangers in the workplace, which creates a duty on the part of their employer to advise workers of potential dangers. Specifically, section 25(2) requires employers, among other things, to "provide information, instruction and supervision to a worker to protect the health or safety of the worker," to "take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker," and to post a copy of the Act and explanatory materials in the workplace. Section 27(2) requires supervisors to "advise a worker of the existence of any potential or actual danger to the health or safety of the worker of which the supervisor is aware," as well as to advise the worker with written instructions on how to mitigate the danger and to ensure every reasonable action is taken to eliminate the hazard.

Section 32.0.3 of OHSA requires employers to assess the risks of workplace violence and reassess those risks as often as necessary to ensure workers are protected from violence. Risks of violence may arise from the nature of the workplace itself, the type of work being performed, and the conditions under which work is being performed. The employer must advise the JHSC of the results of the assessment. Reassessments may include updates to Student Safety Plans (SSPs, see discussion below). These reassessments and updates are vitally important to protecting workers. They need to be completed and the results shared with the staff who are potentially impacted. Research shows that this does not consistently occur.[56]

Importantly, section 32 of OHSA also requires employers to develop and implement policies on violence and harassment. It affirms that all the duties listed in sections 25 and 27 apply to workplace violence, including the duty to provide relevant information. Section 32.0.5(3) specifies an employer's duty to inform workers of a risk of workplace violence "from a person with a history of violent behaviour," if:

(a) the worker can be expected to encounter that person in the course of his or her work; and

(b) the risk of workplace violence is likely to expose the worker to physical injury.

Research and the experience of unions both point to a lack of general understanding of how to meet the obligations established under section 32.0.5. It is unlikely that an administrator will meet a legislative obligation if they are unaware that it exists. Therefore, there would be significant value to be gained from comprehensive training, targeted at administrators, to ensure widespread understanding of the duties established by section 32.0.5 and how administrators may comply with their obligations under OHSA in an education setting.

The Right to Refuse Unsafe Work

The third right established by OHSA is the right to refuse unsafe work. This right is found in section 43(3), which lays out the circumstances in which a worker may refuse work, and the worker and employer responsibilities in the case of such a refusal. Section 43(3)(b.1) specifies that workers have the right to refuse work if "workplace violence is likely to endanger himself or herself." It is important to note, however, that Regulation 857 of the Act limits the right of teachers to refuse unsafe work. The

right to refuse unsafe work does not apply to teachers "where the circumstances are such that the life, health or safety of a pupil is in imminent jeopardy." This restriction on the right to refuse work ensures student safety is prioritized.

Implementing OHSA

To implement the three rights described above (particularly the right to know), OHSA requires employers to develop policies and accompanying programs with respect to workplace violence and harassment. Such policies and programs must include:

- measures to reduce exposure to violence
- measures to summon immediate assistance
- mechanisms for reporting incidents to employers or supervisors
- procedures for investigating and dealing with violent incidents

In school settings, a key component of meeting this obligation is the Student Safety Plan. SSP are intended to be comprehensive prevention and response measures, and they should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of workers when dealing with specific problem behaviours. Plans should include a description of observed behaviours, known triggers or antecedents for those behaviours, prevention strategies, communication procedures, and emergency communication procedures. They should be developed collaboratively by all school board workers who have direct and routine involvement with the student, the school's administration, parents and/or guardians, and, where appropriate, workers from community agencies that regularly work with the student and/or family. Essentially, SSPs should provide workers with the information they need to know about a student in order to lower the likelihood that the student will feel compelled to act out through violence. A good SSP is a fundamental part of a school's overall strategy to keep all students and staff safe.

Unfortunately, many school boards are not meeting the requirements established by OHSA. For example, at OSSTF/FEESO's 2022 Inclusive Education Symposium, educational assistants and early childhood educators pointed out that, although safety plans are supposed to be developed collaboratively, EAs and ECEs are often excluded from the development process, despite these workers' close familiarity with students' emotional and behavioural triggers.[57] Further, to facilitate sharing the information contained in SSPs, it is recommended that safety plans be kept separate from students' confidential Ontario Student Record (OSR) files.[58] Keeping the documents separate should, ostensibly, allow workers who are in contact with students who have exhibited violent behaviour in the past to be aware of potential triggers, de-escalation strategies, and emergency procedures without also having access to confidential information contained in the OSR. All too frequently, this information is not shared with workers who need it. This speaks to the fundamental distinction between having a plan and ensuring that anyone potentially impacted by the plan is aware of the plan. In fact, Stratcom's survey of OSSTF/FEESO members found that only 61% reported that safety plans for students with whom they work directly have been shared with them.[59] This rate is much lower for daily occasional teachers, who often walk into classrooms unaware of triggers and potentially violent situations.

Many schools fail key OHSA requirements. Appropriate staff are not available to reduce the risk of physical violence, and responses to reports of incidents are dismissed as "part of the job" or blamed on the teacher or education worker, who are characterized as failing to de-escalate the situation. These conditions directly contravene OHSA's standards for the prevention and reporting of violent incidents and physical harm to workers.

To ensure province-wide best practices for SSPs are in place, the Minister of Education should set up a process for a comprehensive review of the Workplace Violence in School Boards guidance document. The review should include opportunities for all stakeholders to have meaningful input and should result in the development of effective policy and enforcement mechanisms to ensure school boards, administrators, teachers, and education workers are all working collaboratively to foster safer school environments.

The Education Act

The second relevant piece of legislation is, of course, the Education Act. The Education Act establishes the basic framework for the provision of public education in Ontario. The Act defines how the Ministry of Education, school boards, administrators, education workers, and teachers all work together to provide high-quality public education. High-quality learning can only happen in safe and supportive learning environments, and the Act and its related policies are fundamental in creating supportive learning spaces.

Narrowing in on the sections relevant to workplace violence takes us to part XIII (Behaviour, Discipline and Safety). Within part XIII, section 300 sets out the goals related to behaviour and discipline that include encouraging positive school climates and preventing bullying and assaults. This includes preventing identity-based harassment motivated by racism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Indigenous bias, and anti-disability bias. The section also establishes a framework for responding to inappropriate student behaviour through early interventions and support. Importantly, the section also

- establishes employees' duty to report when they become aware of activities that could lead to suspension or expulsion,
- establishes the school administrators' duty to investigate upon receipt of reports; and
- sets out the specific types of actions that could lead to suspension and expulsion.

Codes of Conduct

Like other legislation, the Education Act also specifies areas where the Minister may make policies and enact regulations. In Ontario's K-12 education system, Ministry policies are articulated through what are called Policy/Program Memoranda (PPMs). In the context of school violence, section 301(1) of the Act establishes the Minister's right to "establish a code of conduct governing the behaviour of all persons in schools," and section 301(2) outlines the purposes of such a code. This code of conduct can be found in PPM 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct, which was revised on June 27, 2024. PPM 128 describes appropriate conduct in a range of contexts—from

cell phones to cannabis—but is rooted in a desire to ensure respect and dignity for all members of the school community, including addressing conflict and difference with civility and non-violence.

Unions representing teachers and education workers in Ontario have expressed concern about the limitations of PPM 128 as it relates to violence in schools. For example, although PPM 128 specifically prohibits bullying behaviours, assault and sexual assault, inflicting bodily harm, engaging in hate propaganda, and engaging in vandalism, it does not capture the specific and concrete acts of violence experienced by students, teachers, and education workers. A more specific list would include:

- committing acts of physical violence, including punching, elbowing, spitting, pushing, slapping, biting, kicking, shoving, scratching, headbutting, pinching, pulling hair, grabbing/tearing clothing
- uttering threats, including but not limited to threats of bodily harm, death threats, and threats to commit sexual assault
- committing acts of physical violence or threatening such acts with weapons (knives, scissors, glass shards, razors, school supplies, furniture)
- verbal abuse and harassment, including name-calling, shouting, and uttering identity-based slurs and insults
- committing acts of vandalism, including destruction of property and "trashing" of classrooms

Because they affect all members of the school community, it is important to explicitly spell out these behaviours. Naming appropriate behaviours helps to make the issue of violence visible and therefore something that can be discussed and addressed. In addition, explicitly naming undesirable behaviours helps students to recognize inappropriate behaviours. This is a first step toward understanding appropriate behaviour, engaging in non-violent alternatives to conflict resolution, and to appropriately expressing frustration and distress. In addition, PPM 128 should explicitly outline consequences for behaviours that contravene the standards set out in the code of conduct. These consequences should include restorative strategies, providing academic supports, referrals to appropriate professional student support personnel (PSSP) staff (such as social workers, child and youth workers, and psychologists), and, when necessary, suspensions (in school or out).

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that racialized, Black, and Indigenous students, as well as students with disabilities, have traditionally been disproportionately disciplined in school communities. In addressing behaviours, PPM 128 should avoid repeating this disproportionality. It must also be accompanied by an overall approach to the issue of conduct in schools that includes additional investments in student supports and other resources.

Discipline

The Education Act also requires the Minister to establish policies and guidelines with respect to disciplining students (section 301(6)), including responding to misbehaviour through progressive discipline, where consequences become more serious in the event that the unwelcome behaviour is repeated, increasingly serious, or both. According to the Act, disciplinary guidelines should also include early and ongoing intervention and prevention strategies as well as requirements for the collection and reporting of information related to behaviour, discipline, and safety in schools. Disciplinary

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policies required under the Act are articulated in PPM 145: Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour. PPM 145 describes progressive discipline as "a whole-school approach that utilizes a continuum of prevention programs, interventions, supports, and consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour and to build upon strategies that promote and foster positive behaviours."[60]

PPM 145 also enacts requirements of OHSA, namely the requirement of sharing information about students who pose a risk of physical harm:

> Given their obligation to respond to serious student incidents and all inappropriate and disrespectful student behaviour that is likely to have a negative impact on the school climate, **board employees (including occasional employees) who work directly with students may need to know, for any particular student, those behaviour(s) that may present a potential risk of physical harm** to school staff or students as documented as part of progressive discipline in the student's Ontario Student Record (OSR).[61] [emphasis added]

However, as already referenced, information-sharing practices are not consistent. For example, one focus group participant in the Stratcom study conducted for OSSTF/FEESO reported that a student had made a direct threat against them but they were not told which student had made the threat, whether steps had been taken to ensure their safety, and if so, what those steps were. Indeed, according to that same study, only 34% of participants indicated that risk assessments had been shared with them and only 14% reported that risk assessments described risk accurately.[62]

OHSA is clear that school boards and administrators need to provide teachers and education workers with information that relates to a risk of workplace violence from any individual with a history of workplace violence that the worker may encounter in the course of their work. Providing information to teachers and education workers regarding risks that students may pose to both adults and other students allows teachers and education workers to proactively manage school situations to prevent or mitigate violent behaviours. It doesn't help anyone to have the people tasked with fostering safe learning environments caught by surprise or constantly looking over their shoulder because they do not feel sure that they have been given sufficient information. Providing information about risks of workplace violence may include sharing personal information. School boards and administrators should be aware of the guidelines on sharing information in such cases and then take appropriate steps to ensure the safety of students and workers.[63]

Reporting

Finally, the Education Act establishes requirements for reporting incidents of violence. These reporting requirements are primarily articulated in PPM 120: Reporting Violent Incidents to the Ministry of Education. In particular, PPM 120 indicates that "All violent incidents that occur on school premises during school-run programs must be reported to the Ministry, whether the violent incident was committed by a student attending the school or whether it was committed by any other person."[64]

OSSTF/FEESO

There is widespread agreement among education workers and teachers that violent incidents are under-reported. Multiple studies of school workers in Ontario have found very low rates of reporting violent incidents in writing or through an online reporting system.[65] This is not surprising, since almost half of those who did report violent incidents thought that the steps taken in response were ineffective for preventing a recurrence.[66] In fact, Santor et al. found that far from receiving a thorough investigation and/or risk assessment, some teachers and education workers received reprisals upon reporting violence. These reprisals include harassment (threats, false allegations), ridicule, belittlement, being given undesirable or unsuitable teaching assignments, denial of professional development, ostracization, and exclusion (for example, being left out of meetings and discussions).[67] Conversations about violence within education spaces often also point to subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which workers are discouraged from reporting violence. Santor et al. label this "responsibilization." In such instances, administrators blame the teacher or education worker for the violence they have experienced. They blame the educator for a supposed inability to cope (often using gendered tropes to do so), diminish the seriousness of the impacts of violence, or characterize violence from students as just "blowing off steam" or simply "part of the job."[68]

Much of the problem of under-reporting can be addressed through system-level interventions. First among these is the urgent need for a comprehensive, streamlined, province-wide online reporting tool. The primary benefit of developing this tool would be to make it easier for teachers and education workers to report violence and harassment. Given the barriers to reporting just described, having an easy, accessible tool would help encourage reporting. Further, a centralized tool would facilitate training, as the same training could be used across the province, rather than having to develop specialized training at the board or school level. Finally, the tool would allow the Ministry to easily aggregate and report on the data obtained through the tool and to develop enforceable mechanisms to address violence.

A second system-level intervention is to ensure that school administrators have the supports, training, and resources they need to respond quickly and appropriately to school violence. It is worth affirming that administrators are as invested in creating safe and nurturing learning environments as are the teachers and education workers in their schools. Beyond their personal connections with, and empathy for, school staff, they also face practical challenges relating to violence. Administrators are ultimately responsible for disciplinary interventions and for finding replacements for teachers and education workers who need time away from work to recover from a violence-related injury. In short, because violence is a complex and system-level problem, there needs to be an acknowledgement that administrators' hands are often tied by a lack of resources and of clear supports and direction from the board and the Ministry. Indeed, if the resources and supports were in place to allow administrators to properly discharge their responsibilities under OHSA and the Education Act, they would be more readily able to do so.

To summarize, both the Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Education Act need amending and strengthening. The recommendations proposed in this paper are intended to create province-wide and board-level systems capable of providing guidance and clarification on the roles and responsibilities of each member of the school community. Creating safer schools will require a collaborative effort supported by robust mechanisms for collecting data, monitoring progress, and sharing successful strategies identified by schools, boards, and the research community.

The Legislative and Policy Context: Recommendations

8. The Minister of Labour should create a sector-specific regulation for the education sector under the Occupational Health and Safety Act that takes into account and addresses the unique nature of education workplaces. The regulation should include the requirement that school board workplace violence and prevention plans and programs must be developed in consultation with a multi-site Joint Health and Safety Committee.

9. The Minister of Labour should establish a provincial advisory committee for the education sector as permitted under section 21 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

10. To ensure consistent meeting of workplace safety obligations across education sector workplaces, the Ministry of Education should officially adopt the clear and more expansive definition of workplace violence provided by section 1(1) of the Occupation Health and Safety Act. The definition in OHSA should be updated to recognize physical harm that does not require medical attention, as well as psychological harm. The Ministry should then ensure that all school boards use and are accountable to the same definition.

11. The Minister of Labour should amend the Occupational Health and Safety Act to require school boards to establish and maintain multi-site Joint Health and Safety Committees.

12. The Minister of Education should provide funding for and require school boards to provide comprehensive, mandatory training on OHSA to all school administrators with emphasis on the requirements of section 32.0.5 and the employer duties set out in that section. Such training should also make clear that OHSA requirements – except where the life, health, or safety of a student is in jeopardy – take priority over those of the Education Act.

13. The Minister of Education should provide funding for and require school boards to provide comprehensive training on conflict resolution, de-escalation, and managing difficult behaviours for all workers and supervisors.

14. Unions should continue to advocate and bargain for the Ministry of Education to provide unions with resources to renew and enhance union training on the right to refuse unsafe work.

15. The Ministry of Education should provide enhanced and stable funding for Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, Prevention Link, the Workers

Health and Safety Centre, and similar labour-led programs for union members to access high-quality health and safety training.

16. The Ministry of Labour should lead a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder review of Workplace Violence in School Boards guidance document with a view to developing specific policy mechanisms capable of ensuring enforcement of the guide's requirements.

17. The Minister of Education should further revise PPM 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct to explicitly describe unwelcome behaviours.

18. The Ministry of Education should mandate anti-bias training for administrators and others tasked with enforcing the code of conduct outlined in PPM 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct to ensure interventions are enacted in a consistent and unbiased manner.

19. The Ministry of Education should develop a single, comprehensive, streamlined, and province-wide online reporting system to ensure uniformity and allow for the collection of data to better understand school violence and guide policy responses.

20. The Ministry of Labour should annually publicize data collected through the online system along with the findings of any compliance initiative regarding workplace violence in the education sector.

21. The Ministry of Education should require school boards to work with unions to develop joint campaigns to promote reporting violent incidents.
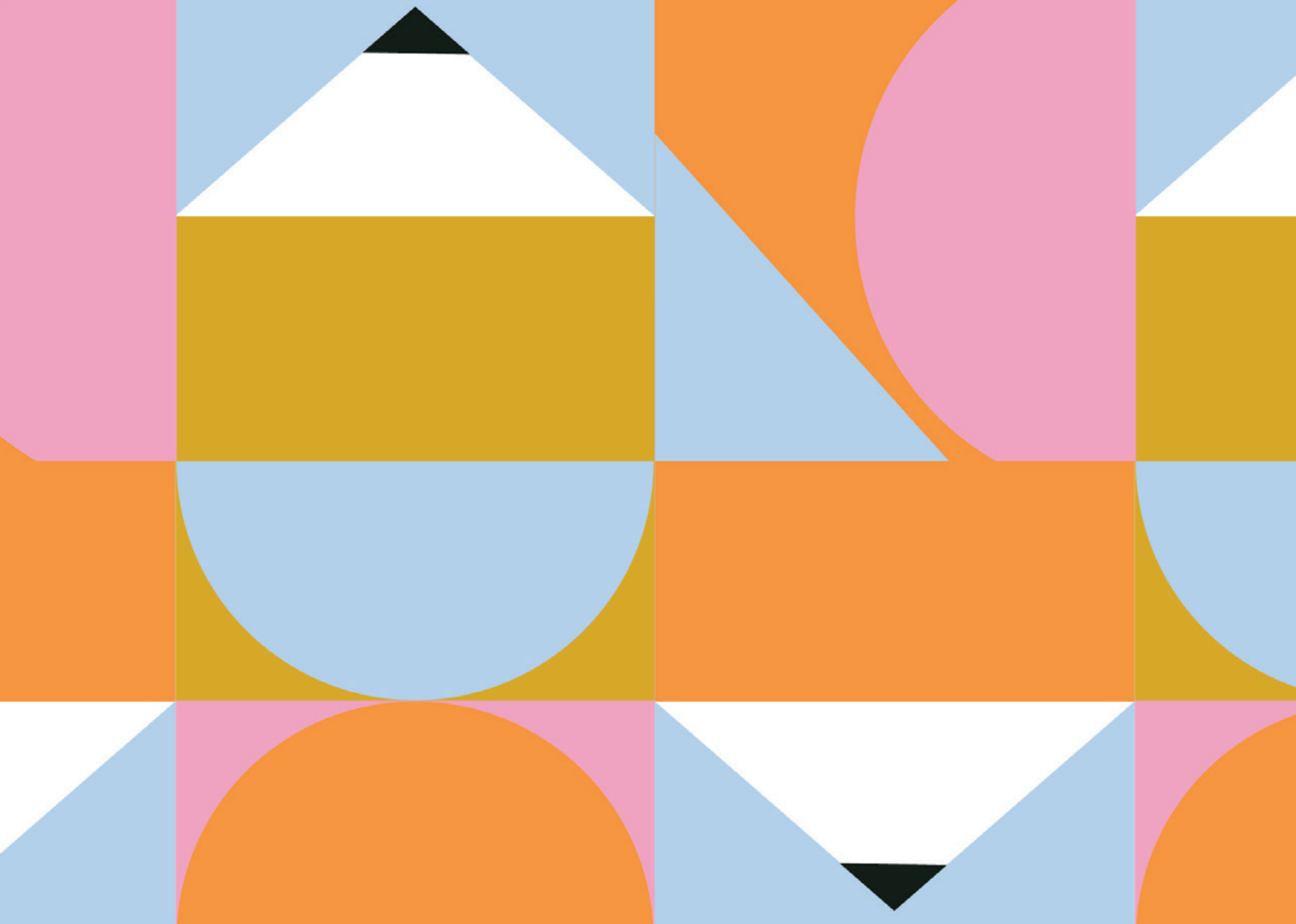
Prevention   Awareness   Resources   Interventions

Part 5.
It's about Resources: interventions and supports

OSSTF/FEESO

When seeking to address the root causes of school violence, stakeholders and policy-makers must reject knee-jerk explanations that unhelpfully lay the blame at the feet of "bad kids" or, worse, students with exceptionalities. Such simplistic accounts tend to lead to calls for responses that rely on a punishment-based approach, focusing on imposing disciplinary consequences rather than addressing root causes of problematic behaviour. We can acknowledge the role of progressive discipline, including suspensions and expulsions as last resorts, but there is a growing consensus among researchers and practitioners that, at the individual level at least, inappropriate behaviour rarely has much to do with malicious intention and has even less to do with "bad kids." For example, at OSSTF/FEESO's 2022 Inclusion Symposium, keynote speaker Dr. Jean Clinton carefully laid out the case for attending to the extent to which students are cognitively and neurologically ready to learn. Far from a punishment model, the neurological and cognitive realities her research highlights show the fundamental value of developing connections and modelling emotional regulation.[69] As importantly, the research suggests that addressing violence requires "zooming out" from the individual and attending to the classroom, board, and wider system-level factors that are impeding neurophysiological readiness to learn.

Indeed, teachers, education workers, and allies alike all stress that

"misbehaviour is generally not intentional or malicious, but an attempt to communicate distress."[70]

A participant quoted by Bruckert et al. helps capture the nuance needed when talking about violence in classrooms:

> I think many of us struggle with terms like 'violence' [which] suggests intent to harm. Many behaviours we deal with are violent in nature, however, the students themselves are not violent in nature – they don't have the ability to express themselves in a safe/expected manner (e.g., poor communication or self-regulation skills)[.71]

Nonetheless, students' inability to find an appropriate way to express themselves or to regulate difficult emotions is popularly characterized as a problem intrinsic to the misbehaving student. This is a particularly common mischaracterization of students with disabilities or other exceptionalities. OSSTF/FEESO supports student-centred approaches to integration of students with exceptionalities, as particularly reflected by the following two policies:

> 7.11.3. integration of an exceptional student into regular classes should be a flexible goal which means to the greatest degree possible; the degree of integration should change as the child's needs change.
> 7.11.4. integration of an exceptional student into regular classes should be recognized as a "process" to allow exceptional students to reach their fullest potential and not just as a matter of placement.

OSSTF/FEESO's student-centred approach to integration is not simply a moral question, although valuing the full social inclusion of all students regardless of ability is, of course, a core principle of public education. Beyond the importance of recognizing the intrinsic worth of students with

exceptionalities, there are deep collective benefits as well. For example, as Dr. Timothy Ross argued at OSSTF/FEESO's Inclusive Education Symposium:

> The mainstreaming in classrooms that started back in the 1960s, creating that presence of disability, allowing other children to appreciate and enjoy the diversity of disability in their classrooms, that exposure has tremendous value because that exposure can be carried forward into adulthood. It can create expectations of disability being present, and therefore in adulthood as we grow older, we question, Why the hell aren't people living with disability here? So, you know, we need that presence, it enriches our communities. When we don't have that presence, the community is at a loss. They're at a loss of diversity, they're at a loss of appreciation and understanding. That exposure is, in my opinion, necessary.[72]

The key takeaway from this perspective is the importance of affirming that students with exceptionalities are not the problem and that they belong in Ontario's classrooms. Further, they deserve to have the supports needed to address challenges with emotional regulation and finding appropriate ways to express distress and frustration.

There are also good reasons to be concerned about lack of resources to support mental health among youth in Ontario and across Canada. Statistics on youth mental health are very troubling, as is the impact that increases in mental distress are having on behaviour within schools. According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health:

- Half (51%) of students indicate a moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression).
- Over one-quarter (27%) of students indicate a serious level of psychological distress.
- The percentage of students reporting an inability to cope with unexpected and difficult problems has significantly increased between 2019, the first year of monitoring, and 2023, from 23% to 31%.[73]

While such high rates of mental distress are troubling on their own, of particular concern in the context of school violence is another finding by Mental Health Research Canada: 34% of youth accessing services have unmet needs. The researchers estimate that across Canada 720,000 youth require mental health supports that they are not receiving.[74]

The proper approach to intervening in response to violence, then, is not to simply default to disciplinary reactions. Progressive discipline plays a role, but there is an even larger role to be played by supportive adults acting based on nuanced understandings about mental health, exceptionality, and neuropsychological readiness to learn.

As described above, PPM 145: Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour establishes guidelines for enacting progressive discipline. Progressive discipline "utilizes a continuum of prevention programs, interventions, supports, and consequences to address inappropriate student behaviour and to build upon strategies that promote and foster positive behaviours."[75] OSSTF/FEESO believes that PPM 128: The Provincial Code of Conduct and School Board Codes of Conduct should explicitly outline consequences for behaviours (including actual and attempted violence as well as threats of violence) that contravene the standards set out in the code of conduct. These consequences should include restorative strategies, providing academic supports, referrals to appropriate PSSP staff such as sociologists, psychologists, etc., and, when necessary, suspensions (in school or out) and expulsions.
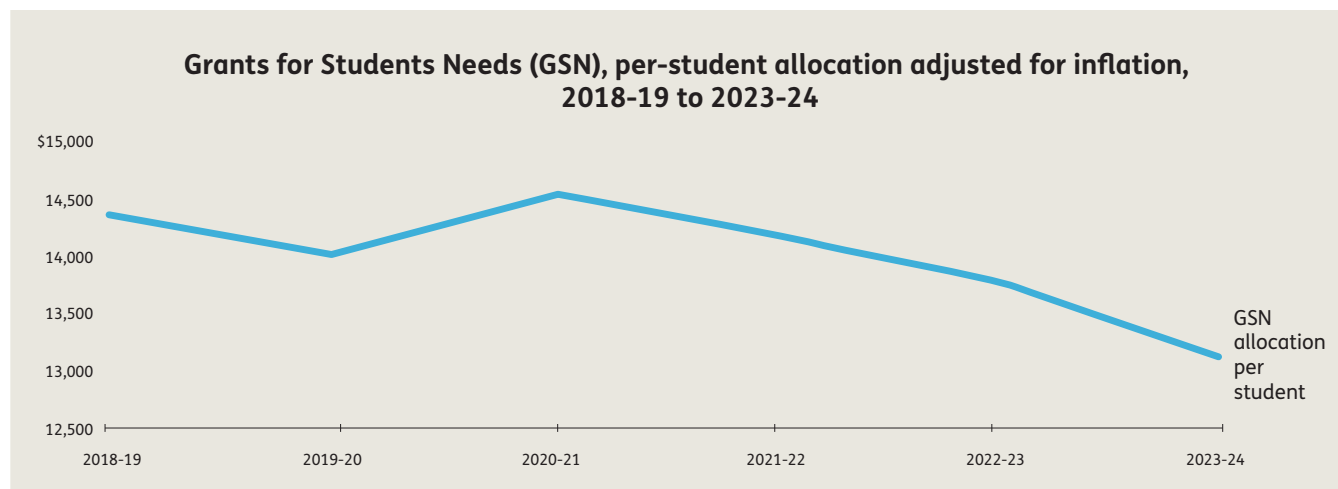
OSSTF/FEESO

In any discussion of discipline as an intervention in violent or problematic behaviour, it is essential to acknowledge and act upon the fact that Black and Indigenous students, as well as students with disabilities, have traditionally been disproportionately disciplined in school communities.[76] Any set of strategies that are primarily disciplinary in nature – including school suspensions – must avoid repeating this historical reality. Indeed, research has found that suspensions and expulsions do not necessarily lead to behavioural change because they do not address the underlying reasons that led to the behaviour in the first place. Additionally, they do not create opportunities for students to learn alternative approaches to regulating their own behaviour, communicating their needs, and resolving conflicts.

Research on the best forms of interventions to prevent and respond to violence is ongoing. Ontario's public education system also has a wealth of expertise available to it through its stakeholders— including education workers and teachers, their unions, board staff, and Ministry staff. Parents also have a deep and obvious investment in ensuring that schools are safe for students, teachers, and education workers alike. Therefore, OSSTF/FEESO is calling for the Minister of Education to convene a multi-stakeholder task force to review and identify best practices related to progressive interventions.

In the meantime, progressive discipline needs to emphasize prevention and supports, relying on discipline sparingly and never in isolation from other strategies. This is particularly true for suspensions and expulsions, which must only be used as a last resort to ensure the safety of the school community. The majority of interventions should come in the form of academic and mental health supports, often through working with appropriate professionals such as EAs, CYWs, psychologists, and counsellors. However, we know that such access is woefully limited.

From the Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario, we know that Ontario has the lowest per capita program spending in the country. For education specifically, Ontario ranks fifth among provinces.[77] Even worse, spending has been in decline over the past several years. Once inflation and increased enrolment are taken into account, the province spent, on average, $1,500 less per student for the 2023-2024 school year than it did for 2018-2019. As a result, over $2 billion is missing from Core Education Funding for the 2024-2025 school year when compared to the 2018-2019 school year.[78] Figure 6 illustrates this trend from 2018-2019 to 2023-2024.

Figure 6. Decline in student funding [79]

Grants for Students Needs (GSN), per-student allocation adjusted for inflation, 2018-19 to 2023-24

OSSTF/FEESO

A key requirement for any type of anti-violence intervention—whether proactive and preventative or post-incident support—is to have the staff in place to properly implement the intervention. Yet, Stratcom's surveys of OSSTF/FEESO and ETFO members found that such resources were rarely available when needed.

Table 5. Access to staff supports [80]

% WHO SAID ACCESS TO SUPPORT STAFF WAS ALWAYS AVAILABLE OR AVAILABLE MOST OF THE TIME WHEN THEY WERE NEEDED [71]		
	ETFO	OSSTF/FEESO
GUIDANCE COUNSELLOR(S)	5%	44%
EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS	26%	40%
CHILD AND YOUTH WORKERS	10%	22%
SOCIAL WORKERS	5%	15%
PSYCHOLOGISTS	3%	5%

Given the trajectory of funding over the past several years, it is not surprising that members of the two unions also reported that, with the exception of student tools, a range of essential student supports had decreased during their time working in the public school system.

Table 6. Availability of supports [81]

| % who said availability of supports had increased and decreased during their time working in the public system.[72]	ETFO		OSSTF/FEESO	
	Increased/ Significantly Increased	Decreased/ Significantly Decreased	Increased/ Significantly Increased	Decreased/ Significantly Decreased
Student tools (Access to technology, sensory tools)	36%	31%	37%	24%
Student spaces (e.g., calming spaces, specialized classes)	21%	47%	25%	37%
In class supports (EAs/ support personnel)	7%	77%	10%	69%
In school supports (e.g., CYWs, Guidance Counsellors)	6%	59%	9%	49%
Community supports (e.g., treatment professionals)	5%	46%	9%	38%
Board supports (e.g., Behaviour specialists, Itinerant staff)	6%	60%	7%	46%

The Ministry needs to immediately reverse this trend with a targeted commitment to promoting safe schools. The Ontario government already has Planning Provision funding worth $1.39 billion. This funding should be used to create a new Emergency Safe School Fund to bring in more qualified staff such as PSSPs, EAs, and other workers.

Finally, successful interventions will depend upon our ability to bring together best practices, multiple sources of professional expertise, and a full complement of qualified staff to implement them. Connecting all these pieces into concrete interventions will also require a comprehensive and intentionally designed series of training programs. The training and the interventions themselves should be trauma-informed and include guidance on non-violent crisis intervention for dealing with aggressive behaviour.[82]

It's about resources: interventions and supports: Recommendations

22. Unions, school boards, and administrators should collaboratively develop processes to follow up with students who have committed violent acts. These processes should be led by board-employed professional student support personnel such as child and youth workers and regulated health professionals (e.g., psychologists and social workers).

23. The Ministry of Education should accept and implement the Ontario Autism Coalition's recommendation to "create a policy statement regarding exclusion to ensure that all school boards consistently implement a specific standard and criteria for the appropriate exclusion of students from school property where warranted as a last resort."[83]

24. The Minister of Education should create a multi-stakeholder task force to review and identify best practices related to progressive interventions.

25. The Minister of Education should increase the ratio of education workers to students in the Core Education Funding so that schools and school boards can hire additional qualified staff, including mental health professionals, educational assistants, child and youth workers, and other education workers.

26. The Minister of Education should expand funding and eligibility for safe school grants to allow school boards to hire additional qualified staff such as professional student support personnel, educational assistants, and other education workers into the public education system.

27. The Ministry of Education, school boards, and unions should collaboratively develop a series of comprehensive, trauma-informed training programs on progressive interventions and non violent crisis intervention.

🟩 Prevention   🟥 Awareness   🟦 Resources   🟨 Interventions
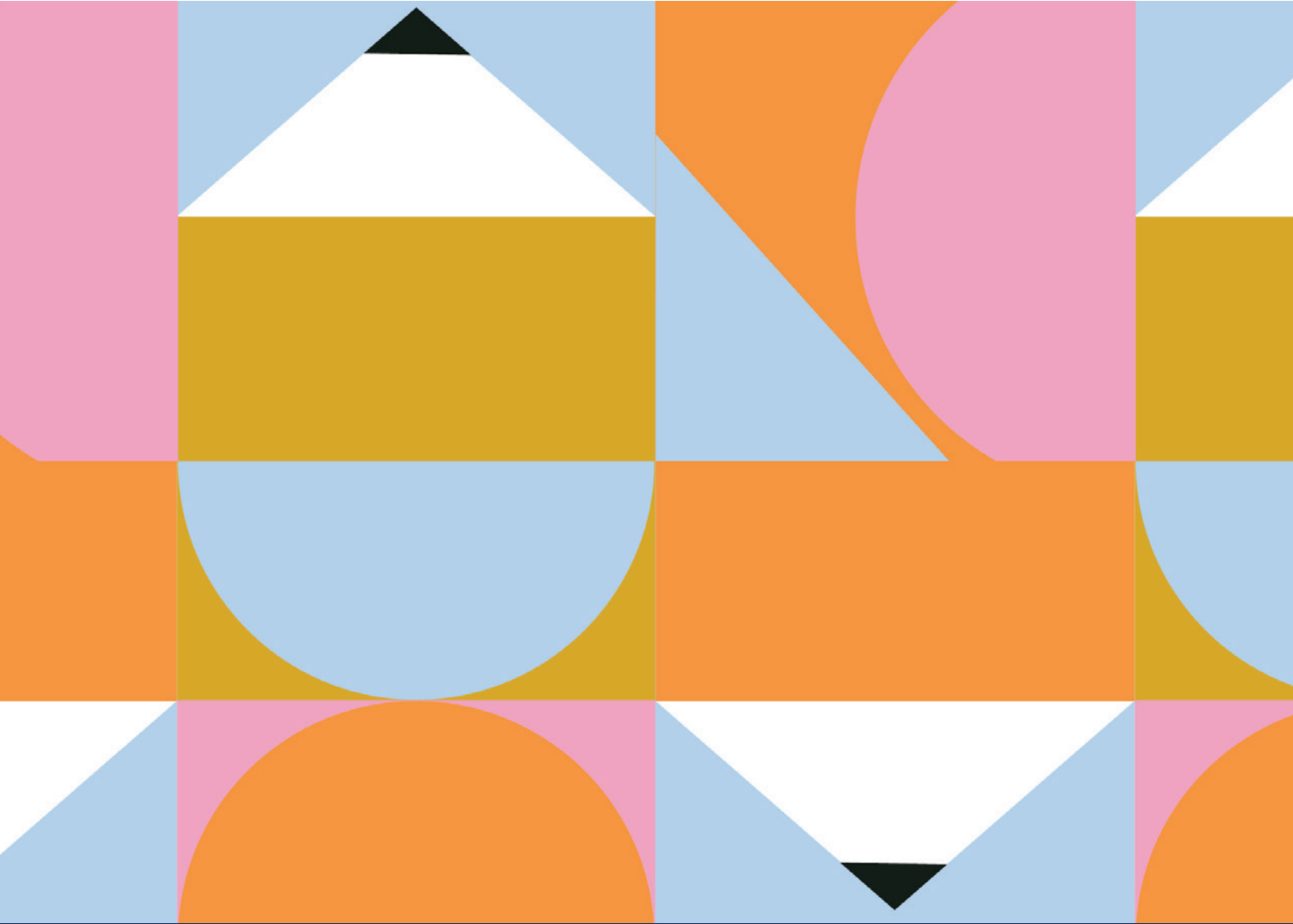
Part 6.
We Need to Work Together

Violence in schools is not inevitable. We can build and grow a strong public education system that proactively creates safe learning environments for students and ensures that every worker returns home safe and unharmed at the end of the day. However, the only way to achieve this is through collaboration and cooperation. To that end, we conclude this discussion paper by identifying related but distinct domains where there is collaborative work to be done. Such collaborative work should always be oriented toward aligning efforts on violence in schools utilizing the expertise from, for example, the Ministry of Health, public health agencies, community and parent organizations, and mental health agencies. This reflects the public-health orientation toward school violence described above.

To ensure an immediate and strategic approach to preventing workplace violence in education, OSSTF/FEESO is calling for the creation of a Safe at School Action Table. The table would be comprised of representatives from:

- education unions, including the Ontario Federation of Teachers
- community groups, with attention to ensuring representation of groups advocating on behalf students who are racialized, First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, who have exceptionalities, or who experience other vulnerabilities
- school boards
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Health
- Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development
- parents

The Safe at School Action Table would be mandated to develop a Safe at School Action Plan. This plan should provide guiding principles for ensuring OHSA is fully implemented, enabling and encouraging reporting of violent incidents, and identifying research-informed standards for staffing levels for professionals such as educational assistants, psychologists, and child and youth workers. Finally, the table should be mandated to identify strategies for ensuring there are appropriate community supports for students outside of schools. This includes access to counselling and related supports, but also access to third spaces where students can find safe and welcoming opportunities to develop connections with their peers and combat the isolation and radicalization endemic to our increasingly online world.

OSSTF/FEESO is also calling for true collaboration in one of the thornier elements of our public education system: collective bargaining. We believe a fundamental step toward promoting safety and anti-violence would be to include language reflecting mutual accountability for key aspects of reducing violence in all education sector collective agreements. This would reflect a shared commitment to working collaboratively and would provide legal mechanisms for holding all parties to account when they fall short.

Finally, we acknowledge that the majority of calls for action included in this paper require the involvement of the government and/or school boards. However, there is currently a wealth of

untapped knowledge and experience within education unions and their affiliates. To harness this experience we conclude by calling for a joint task force comprised of representatives from the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) affiliates, the OTF itself, and the unions representing education workers in Ontario. This task force would be mandated to develop and coordinate campaigns advocating for system-level changes alongside union-led strategies for combatting violence in the workplace

Working Together: Recommendations

28. The Minister of Education should create a multi-stakeholder Safe at School Action Table mandated to develop a comprehensive Safe at School Action Plan.

29. Education sector unions should collaboratively develop and coordinate campaigns to advocate for system-level anti-violence measures and union-led strategies for combatting violence in the workplace.

30. The parties under the School Boards Collective Bargaining Act should bargain collective agreement language that reflects greater transparency and accountability in efforts to reduce workplace violence and jointly develop processes designed to ensure that goal.

■ Prevention	■ Awareness	■ Resources	■ Interventions

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[52] Trisha Perry (Arbitrator), "Unreported: The New Brunswick Teachers' Federation and His Majesty in Right of Province of New Brunswick as represented by the Department of Finance and Treasury Board (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development)," (October 11 2024).

[53] Ministry of Education, "Considerations for program planning," 2024, no. December 10 (2024), https://www.dcp.edu.gov.on.ca/en/program-planning/considerations-for-program-planning/health-and-safety.

[54] In 2018, the Resource Working Group subcommittee of the Provincial Working Group on Health and Safety developed a document called, *Workplace Violence in School Boards: A Guide to the Law* (updated in 2023) for workers and stakeholders in the education sector. The document provides an accessible and comprehensive overview of how OHSA is to be implemented within the education sector. Readers are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the guide.

[55] Ministry of Education Ontario, "Policy/program memorandum 120: Reporting violent incidents to the Ministry of Education," (16 May 2011): footnote #4, https://www.ontario.ca/document/education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-120.

[56] Cousineau, Zhang, and Brinkmeyer, *Stratcom: OSSTF/FEESO*.

[57] OSSTF/FEESO, *From special needs to special rights: Report from OSSTF/FEESO's Symposium on Inclusive Education* (Toronto, May 2023), 29, https://www.osstf.on.ca/-/media/Provincial/Documents/Publications/research-studies/studies/en_from-special-needs-to-special-rights_report-from-osstf_feeso-symposium-on-inclusive-education.ashx?la=en-CA.

[58] Ministry of Labour Ontario, Immigration, Training and Skills Development and Ministry of Education Ontario, *Workplace violence in school boards: A guide to the law* (King's Printer for Ontario, 2023), https://files.ontario.ca/mlitsd-workplace-violence-in-school-boards-guide-en-2023-11-23.pdf.

[59] Cousineau, Zhang, and Brinkmeyer, *Stratcom: OSSTF/FEESO*, 26.

[60] Ministry of Education Ontario, "Policy/program memorandum 145: Progressive discipline and promoting positive student behaviour," (17 October 2018), https://www.ontario.ca/document/

education-ontario-policy-and-program-direction/policyprogram-memorandum-145.

[61] Ontario, "P/PM 145."

[62] Cousineau, Zhang, and Brinkmeyer, *Stratcom: OSSTF/FEESO*, 25.

[63] Ontario and Ontario, *Workplace violence in school boards: A guide to the law*, 18-19.

[64] Ontario, "P/PM 120." Emphasis original.

[65] Cousineau, Zhang, and Brinkmeyer, *Stratcom: OSSTF/FEESO*, 15. Bruckert, Santor, and Mario, *In harm's way, 22*; Santor, Bruckert, and McBride, *Facing the Facts*, 27; Santor, Bruckert, and McBride, *Facing the Facts.*

[66] Cousineau, Zhang, and Brinkmeyer, *Stratcom: OSSTF/FEESO*, 17.

[67] Santor, Bruckert, and McBride, *Facing the Facts*, 29-30. See also, Jennifer Del Riccio, "Classrooms in Crisis: Workplace Violence and Harassment Experienced by Educators in Ontario," *Education law journal* 30, no. 2 (2021): 162-63.

[68] Santor, Bruckert, and McBride, *Facing the Facts*, 11 and 26.

[69] Inclusion Symposium, 5. See also Angie Rosati and Jacqueline Lynch, "Professional Learning on the Neuroscience of Challenging Behavior: Effects on Early Childhood Educators' Beliefs and Practices," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 51, no. 2 (2023): 236, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-021-01301-2. See also: Jane E. Sanders, "'I Think the Teachers Should Really Connect More With the Students': The Influence of Systemic Racism, Inequity, School, and Community Violence on Connection for High School Students Who Are Suspended or Expelled," *Youth & Society 56*, no. 7 (2024), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0044118X231226396.

[70] OSSTF/FEESO, *From special needs to special rights*, 28. See also:

Cara Colorado and Melanie D. Janzen, "A critical discourse analysis of school-based behavioural policies: Reconceptualizing understandings of responses to student (mis)behaviours," *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy 195* (2021): 64, https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/cjeap/article/view/69841; Rosati and Lynch, "Professional Learning on the Neuroscience of Challenging Behavior: Effects on Early Childhood Educators' Beliefs and Practices," 236.

[71] Bruckert, Santor, and Mario, *In harm's way*, 4.

[72] OSSTF/FEESO, *From special needs to special rights*, 8.

[73] Angela Boak and Hayley A. Hamilton, *The Mental Health and Well-Being of Ontario Students, 1991-2023: Findings from the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey* (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), 2024), iv-v, https://www.camh.ca/-/media/research-files/osduhs-mental-health-and-wellbeing-report_2023.pdf.

[74] Mental Health Research Canada, *A generation at risk: The state of youth mental health in Canada* (Mental Health Research Canada and Pollara, October 2024), 7, https://www.mhrc.ca/youth-mental-health.

[75] Ontario, "P/PM 145."

[76] Blaire Cholewa et al., "Predictors and academic outcomes associated with in-school suspension," *School Psychology Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2018).

[77] Financial Accountability Office of Ontario, *2022-23 interprovincial budget comparison.*

[78] Tranjan, "Ontario's Core Education Funding."

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[80] Cousineau, Zhang, and Hoffman, *Stratcom: ETFO*, 14. Cousineau, Zhang, and Brinkmeyer, *Stratcom: OSSTF/FEESO*, 22.

[81] Cousineau, Zhang, and Hoffman, *Stratcom: ETFO*, 16. Cousineau, Zhang, and Brinkmeyer, *Stratcom: OSSTF/FEESO*, 23.

[82] "Trauma-informed practice" refers to a cluster of approaches that recognize the impact of trauma on children's readiness to learn and therefore emphasize creating a safe and caring environment for all students. Such practices can include awareness and avoidance of potential triggers, replacing judgement with compassion, and using restorative practices to minimize discipline. See: National Education Association, "Trauma-informed practices," (September 2023), https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/trauma-informed-practices.

[83] Coalition, *Recommendations for Special Education*, 7.

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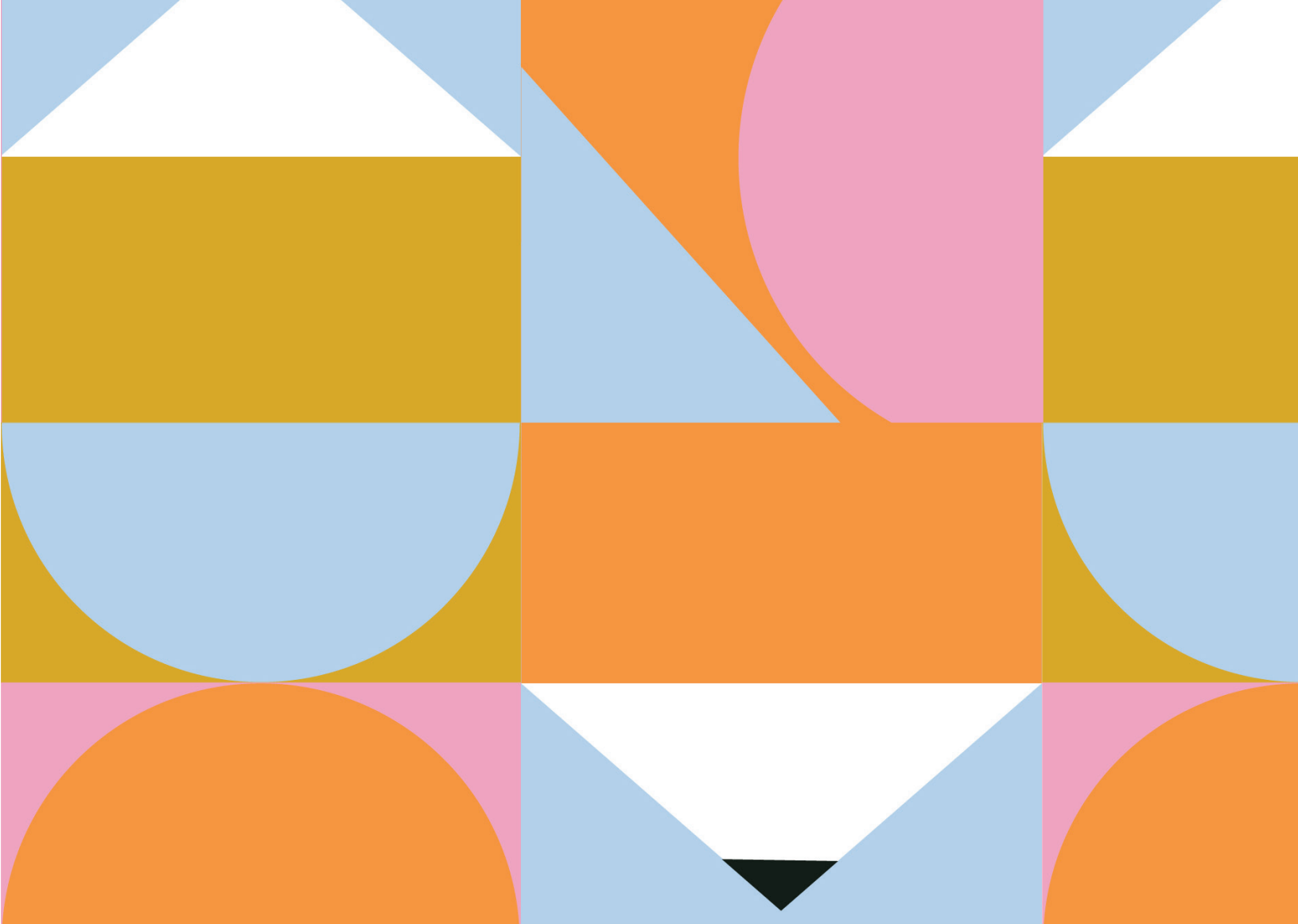
Summit
Report

Introduction

In May 2023, OSSTF/FEESO commissioned Stratcom Inc. to survey our members on their experiences of workplace violence. Members had already been sharing their stories and experiences at local and provincial meetings, but we knew that the strength of our advocacy efforts would be greatly enhanced by having hard data to back up our claims. To help build a case that would show the nature and extent of violence across all grades, we intentionally modeled our study on a similar one commissioned by ETFO earlier the same year.

The data confirmed what members and external researchers have been saying for some time. The problem of violence is real, and it is getting worse.

Because it was always our intention to move beyond the data and to find concrete ways to address the problem, in June 2024 we launched a Safer Schools campaign, parallel to campaigns that OECTA and ETFO were also running.

We then produced a policy paper called *Building Safer School Communities* and hosted the Safe at School Summit on January 22, 2025. We are truly grateful for the nearly two hundred people who took time from their work and their busy lives to help us move forward the conversation on workplace violence. The summit attracted front-line education workers, teachers, principals' and employer representatives, community groups, and many more.

This report provides a summary of what we heard at the Summit and the action priorities set out by participants.

Safe at School Summit—Panelists and presenters

Dr. Hayley Hamilton

Senior Scientist and Co-Director of the Institute for Mental Health Policy Research The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)

Dawn Hoffman

Senior Research Consultant
Stratcom

Patrick Iregura

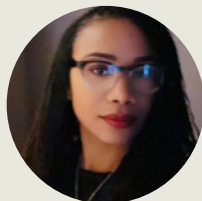Bilingual Community Engagement Coordinator
White Ribbon

Alison Osborne

President & Executive Director Ontario Principals' Council

Dr. Darcy Santor

Professor of Psychology
University of Ottawa

Solange Scott

President
OSSFT/FEESO District 12, Toronto

Dr. Vidya Shah

Ed.D., OCT Associate Professor, Leadership & Education, York University Faculty of Education

The research

Workers and unions in the education sector are particularly committed to making sure that the work we do and the policies we advocate for are firmly rooted in evidence. To that end, the conference began with Dawn Hoffman, a Senior Research Consultant with Stratcom, providing an overview of current research on the rates and nature of violence in schools.

Hoffman began her presentation with an important observation about the emotional realities of talking about violence and experiences of violence. She reminded participants that:

> *"There's no shame in sharing your stories. The shame is that we, as a society, have failed to do anything about it."*

This was an extremely important reminder and helped provide an important framing that was repeated in various ways throughout the day: violence is a systemic problem, with systemic origins and that need to be addressed at a systemic level. In her presentation, Hoffman focused on the following themes.

Violence is increasing and takes multiple forms

As reported in the OSSTF/FEESO Policy Paper, Stratcom's research into OSSTF/FEESO members shows that rates of violent incidents have been increasing over time. Hoffman shared these findings as well as findings from similar studies on members of ETFO and CUPE. Across studies, the findings are remarkably—and dishearteningly—consistent. Violent acts in schools include a range of behaviours such as physical assaults (biting, hitting, kicking and the use of physical objects and furniture to inflict harm, verbal assaults (including racist and misogynistic abuse), bullying, harassment, and threats. The research at the centre of Hoffman's presentation focused on the frequency with which these behaviours target teachers and education workers, but she emphasized the fact that student-on-student violence is also a major problem. Indeed, witnessing such violence has severe and negative consequences for workers' mental health and for the entire school environment. The research also confirms that workers who are women, Indigenous, disabled, and/or belong to 2SLGBTQIA+ communities face even higher rates of violence.

The impact of violence

For the wide range of workers who experience violence in education worksites, experiences of violence—including witnessing violence among students—has serious mental and physical health implications. Hoffman shared stories from focus groups that show how serious these impacts can be. As one focus group participant put it, "...a student...randomly punched an EA in the back of the head really hard. He was grabbing her...Another teacher had to pull him off...The EA was in shock and did not realize the extent of her injuries until later...She ended up off work for three months with a concussion." These kinds of incidents and the resulting physical injuries are all too common.

As importantly, Hoffman and multiple participants throughout the summit echoed the necessity of recognizing psychological injuries as real injuries. Teachers and education workers report anxiety

and PTSD as a result of workplace violence. These injuries are real and need to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, there is evidence from multiple studies showing that violence has become normalized. Workers are told "it's part of the job" and the severity of its impact is downplayed.

> *"For the first time in my 25 years as an educator, I dreaded coming to work every day. I was starting to have severe anxiety and heart palpitations…I have a lot of skills, a lot of training in behavior management and ASD and all these other significant things, but what it came down to was there were not enough supports to meet the needs of those children in the classroom… From the Ministry down, all this slashing of funding has really affected what can go on in schools, and we are all in survival mode."*

One result of these realities is that teachers and education workers are doing their jobs in the face of unrealistic expectations. Supports are not in place to ensure that workers can do their jobs safely while ensuring that all students enjoy a safe and nurturing learning environment. The summit heard multiple data points showing that when a worker needs support from a colleague—particularly educational assistants, child and youth workers – to deal with a student that has become violent, those colleagues are simply not available. This reality makes worse the anxiety and stress that violence creates. It is no wonder, then, that many workers in the education sector are actively considering leaving for other professions.

> *"You walk down a hall and you might have someone randomly call out at you [profanity directed at women]…And we are expected to just brush things off. We excuse it and say they haven't learned the life skills. But we are not teaching them life skills."*

A system-level problem

As other speakers and presenters noted throughout the day, Hoffman emphasized the importance of recognizing the broader context of violent behaviours. She emphasized two areas in which system-level factors are mitigating against efforts to reduce violence.

First, is a lack of accountability. This represents a failure of decision-makers at multiple levels to develop and implement policies, reporting procedures, and other mechanisms to address and eliminate violence. Second, is a lack of funding. Large class sizes alongside a shortage of child and youth workers, educational assistants, mental health professionals in schools both underpin and exacerbate the rise of violent incidents in schools.

> *"From the Ministry down all this slashing of funding has really affected what can go on in schools, and we are all in survival mode."*

Indeed, 34% of OSSTF/FEESO members say that child and youth workers were always available or available most of the time when needed. This means in 66% of situations when they were needed to support students, they were either never, rarely or only sometimes available. Similarly, half of survey participants reported that educational assistants were either never, rarely or only sometimes available when needed. Staffing shortages—a direct result of funding shortages—have effectively abandoned

the students who need supports the most, denying them the opportunity to work with and learn from the fullest possible range of education workers and teachers.

From systems to schools: connecting context, identity, and mental health to school boards and classrooms

Because the problem of violence in education settings is multifaceted and complex, it can be difficult to know where exactly to begin to address it. A key goal of the summit was to focus on actions relating to policy change, advocacy, and collaboration. Two panel discussions helped draw connections between systemic factors that contribute to inappropriate behaviours and the on-the-ground supports and interventions that would eliminate those behaviours where possible and mitigate the damage caused when they cannot be prevented. See page 61 for the names and titles of the panel contributors.

> *"The numbers continue to rise. We need change now!" (Participant, via Menti)*

There was a general consensus that students are struggling. Dr. Hamilton told the summit about CAMH data showing increases in the percentage of people who are reporting mental health challenges, distress, symptoms of anxiety and depression. When looking at student data in particular, there has been a "big jump" with respect to symptoms of anxiety and depression and major warning signs when you ask people how they are feeling overall or to self-rate their mental health.

The causes of these struggles are multiple. Dr. Shah pointed to systems of oppression such as racism, colonialism, ablism and patriarchy, noting that, "when I think about this notion of violence, I think about the fact that so many of these larger systems of oppression operate such that they benefit from us being violent towards ourselves, violent towards each other, and violent towards the more than human world." Panelists also agreed that the sheer volume of information to which students are exposed, and the conflicting demands and expectations students carry around with them—literally carrying these demands in the form of omnipresent, attention-demanding cellphones—are more than humans evolved to comprehend. In the face of this onslaught, it is no wonder that students report feeling less able to cope with unexpected problems. Iregura argued that boys in particular face problems with being sold a vision of masculinity or how to be men that is inauthentic. He advocated creating opportunities for boys and young men to reflect on the vision they are being sold.

> And half the time it's going to be sobering and humbling because between the venture capitalists making most of the money, the content creators making some of it, and the technology and the tech bros and all that, then you have a mass of consumers who are also the drivers of inventory, who might not be necessarily gaining the most, but a lot is taken from them.

This disconnect between the inauthentic vision of masculinity and boys' own lived experiences and goals has very real psychological effects and is another contributor to violent and aggressive behaviour.

Ultimately, all of this leads to mental health challenges, disorientation, dysregulation, and a deficit of resilience. In a word used by panelists, it leads to overwhelm. It leads everyone to being in a constant state of survival mode.

The question, then, is what to do in the face of all this feeling of overwhelm? How do we move from survival mode to thriving mode?

The goal is clear: find a way to reconnect to those human moments and foster opportunities for reflection and thriving. As Dr. Shah put it:

> *"I also think about the fact that I truly believe that every single one of us doesn't want to live in a place of violence. **We want to live in a place of freedom. We want to live in communities that understand us, that uplift us, that honor us,** and that violent acts, whether towards ourselves or towards others, or towards the more than human world, are actually expressions of frustration, are expressions of a lack of awareness of how to navigate a world that, again, is based upon the fact that there are folks who benefit from that violence."*

Students, teachers, education workers, administrators and parents all share the same obstacle to thriving: too many challenges and not enough resources.

As Osborne asked: "Is it too obvious if I say we need more money? Because we need more money." Funding shortfalls lead to bigger classes with more complex mixes of needs. This leaves everyone feeling frustrated and contributes to deficits in resilience and ability to self-regulate. It also means that when a student needs an adult's support or even when they simply need an adult to model proper regulation or to talk through what's happening, that adult is not available. This is particularly important in the context of how schools respond to misbehaviour. The panel noted that a team approach is best, where the principal can provide the formal response and have that backed up by a child and youth worker, who can help the student process what happened. Of course, this is only possible if a child and youth worker is available, and too often they are not.

> *"Where does the need for educational support end and the need for community supports begin? It seems so much is being laid at the footsteps of the education system because we see the needs there." (Participant, via Menti)*

But strains in the system show up in other ways too. Scott pointed to the staffing shortages (particularly among education workers) that happen when talented people decide that they can no longer take the constant threat of violence. Dr. Santor noted that according to research he is involved in, "You are at the point where 50% of your members would look elsewhere for work if they could find a job, 25% are certain you can expect to experience an instance of harassment or violence every single week of every single year throughout your entire career."

> *"More and more people are being expected to work beyond the scope of their training and personal capacity leading to anxiety and burnout. We are creating unstable work environments." (Participant, via Menti)*

Additional complicating factors that panelists noted include the fact that reporting violence has become more complicated, which increases feelings of helplessness amongst workers. Moreover, there are too few supports in place for teachers and education workers who have witnessed violence.
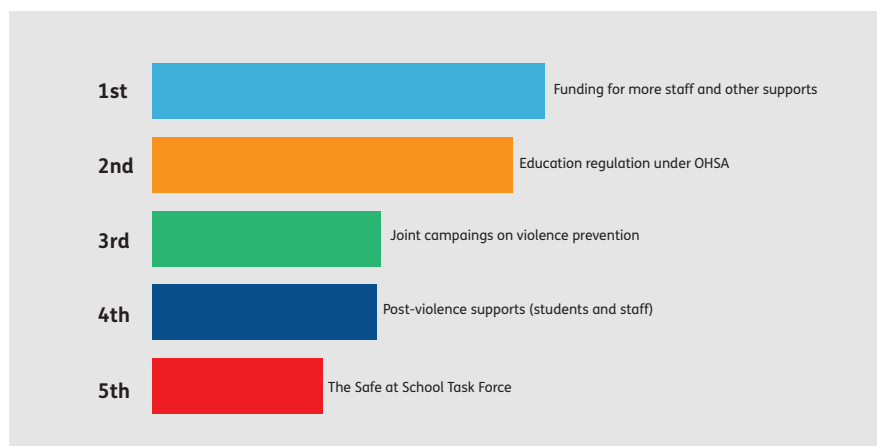
In some cases, they witness extreme violence including gun violence and yet are expected to report to work the next day and continue with their work. This is another example of the system not taking psychological injuries as serious injuries.

However, the panelists agreed that change is possible and that it will come primarily through collaborative campaign and advocacy efforts. These efforts need to be directed at achieving specific funding, policy, and awareness objectives that will have positive impacts across the system. To support this work, OSSTF/FEESO presented its Policy Paper, highlighting five of what the Federation considers to be the most urgent goals.

Focusing our efforts

OSSTF/FEESO's Policy Paper and summit were developed to help move beyond the data and to inspire action on concrete, implementable recommendations. The Building Safer Schools policy paper contains 30 such recommendations organized by who is empowered to implement each recommendation and by the type of change (prevention, awareness, resources, interventions) they envision.

Following a brief presentation highlighting five priority recommendations, participants were invited to take part in small-group discussions about those recommendations and other issues they saw as deserving immediate attention. OSSTF/FEESO staff took notes on those discussions, which were compiled to help inform this report. Here are some of the highlights.

1st	Funding for more staff and other supports
2nd	Education regulation under OHSA
3rd	Joint campaings on violence prevention
4th	Post-violence supports (students and staff)
5th	The Safe at School Task Force

Recommendation #1: The provincial government should recognize that violence in schools is reaching crisis proportions and commit itself to making violence reduction and prevention an urgent priority. This will require properly funding violence reduction strategies, as described in the remaining recommendations (page 23).

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There was broad consensus that to have the government recognize the crisis proportions of school violence was vitally important. It would help move the province forward on issues such as funding and creating an education sector regulation within OHSA, and it provides a focus for joint union and ally campaigns and lobbying.

When asked about potential barriers to achieving meaningful reductions in workplace violence, summit participants frequently pointed to the Minister of Education and the Government as major obstacles. They also noted the reluctance on the part of the government to release data on violence and safety issues.

Recommendation #4: Unions, school boards, and administrators should develop joint campaigns on building nonviolent school cultures. (page 23).

Collaboration and solidarity were key themes in many of the table discussions. Opportunities to collaborate range from Joint Health and Safety Committees to a variety of potential campaigns. Participants noted that trustees as well as provincial representatives need to be lobbied. Some suggested that it might be helpful to target specific kinds of violence as a focus, while others reminded each other of the importance of jointly promoting anti-violence strategies at the bargaining table.

There was some acknowledgement that insofar as violence is a systemic issue, as captured by the first panel discussion, there is no joint campaign that can fundamentally affect societal problems. Nonetheless, the consensus was that increasing the visibility of the problem, particularly among parents, needs to be an ongoing project. Most importantly, vocal and frank campaigning needs to be done jointly and is within the capacities of unions and stakeholders to achieve.

Recommendation #7: The government should implement a dedicated tuition waiver to attract students into education programs for occupations experiencing shortages (education workers, professional student support personnel, etc.). Similar programs have already been introduced in the health care and long-term care sectors. (page 29).

A theme that recurred throughout the day—from the research presentation through the panels and at the small table discussions—was the relationship between violence and the province's difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers and education workers. In that light, there was agreement that more needs to be done to attract people to education worker professions. There appears to be a decline in people entering the profession in part because of violence and in part because of the cost of attending college or university. A dedicated tuition waver could address some of the latter pressure.

However, there was an equally strong consensus that the province will not be able to retain education workers unless there are major changes to their salaries and working conditions. The waiver would be a short-term stop-gap measure; it would be an important first step but cannot fundamentally address retention problems.

Recommendation #8. The Minister of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development should create a sector-specific regulation for the education sector under the Occupational Health and Safety Act that takes into account and addresses the unique nature of education workplaces. The regulation should include the requirement that school board workplace violence and prevention plans and programs must be developed in consultation with a multi-site Joint Health and Safety Committee (page 40).

An OHSA regulation specific to the education sector was seen as a major priority for many participants. In general, people pointed to the consistency such a regulation would provide. It could create a shared definition of what constitutes violence and provide clear direction on how to balance the requirements of the Education Act and the Ontario Human Rights Code with OHSA's protections from workplace violence.

An education sector regulation could include:
- A consistent set of definitions (see also Recommendation #10, page 46).
- A requirement that school, school board, and workplace violence and prevention plans and programs be developed in consultation with a multi-site Joint Health and Safety Committee.
- Clear directions on notifications of the risk of workplace violence (including documentation and how notifications should be communicated to workers).
- Directions on the specific training that must be provided to all workers to prevent workplace violence.

Recommendation #26: The Minister of Education should expand funding and eligibility for safe school grants to allow school boards to hire additional qualified staff, such as professional student support personnel, educational assistants, and other education workers into the public education system (page 47).

The single-most recurring theme throughout the summit was the need for increased funding. Specifically, the need to fix the funding formula to ensure there are enough supportive adults in schools and worksites and to provide the non-staff supports (assistive devices, transportation infrastructure, and so on) that students need. As some participants pointed out, at the very least, having the funding needed to ensure more caring adults are in the room will provide the breathing room needed to work on other things such as reporting mechanisms and progressive interventions.

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Ultimately, proper funding would reflect a commitment to the core goals and values of public education and would allow the system to expand to meet current and future needs.

> **Recommendation #28: The Minister of Education should create a multi-stakeholder Safe at School Action Table mandated to develop a comprehensive Safe at School Action Plan (page 50).**

As with Recommendation #4 (page 26), participants saw a Safe at School Action Table as important because it represents an opportunity to collaborate across a range of perspectives to address problems of workplace violence. To that end, participants emphasized that it will be important to get the composition of the table right. It should include a range of stakeholders, including representatives of parents, front line workers, school board associations, principals' councils, and community groups.

The Safe at School Action Table is particularly urgent because it could play a key role in achieving Recommendation #1 (page 26) and finally gaining government recognition that workplace violence has reached crisis levels in the education sector.

Next Steps

We understand the contours of the problem. We know how often violence is happening and we know the kinds of violent acts that teachers and education workers experience directly and see perpetrated against colleagues and students. The impact that violence has in terms of student wellbeing, educational outcomes, the physical and mental health of teachers and education workers, and professional retention is abundantly clear.

Building Safer School Communities identified 30 recommendations that are concrete, actionable, and capable of having a positive impact on workplace violence. The presentations and discussions at the *Safe at School summit* affirmed the importance of moving forward on these recommendations. As discussed above, focus needs to be on collaborative campaigning to achieve immediate legislative and funding reforms.

We hope that all allies of public education will find areas where they have the most leverage and lean in to lobbying, campaigning, educating, and training wherever they can.

In that spirit, OSSTF/FEESO intends to focus our efforts on where we believe we can have the most impact.

1. We will continue to call for a Safe at School Action Table. If the Minister of Education won't take the lead on creating a Safe at School Action Table, then we will work with education unions, parent groups, principals' councils and any other willing stakeholders to do it ourselves. The first major task of the Table would be to develop a Safe at School Action Plan. Such a plan would integrate the recommendations contained in Building Safer School Communities with best practices and recommendations from diverse sources into a comprehensive agenda for building safe, nurturing school communities.

2. We will continue seeking political support for an education sector regulation under OHSA. After increased funding, achieving an education sector regulation was identified as a top priority by summit participants. We need to continue educating legislators on the need for such a regulation and working with supportive elected officials to make it a reality.

3. We will develop material to support campaigns and lobbying. Participants affirmed and re-affirmed the importance of raising awareness about the problem of violence in educational settings and the multiple strategies available to us to address that problem. It is important, therefore, that we work together to develop lobby kits and other campaign materials that union locals, community groups, and other allies can adapt and adopt to support their own awareness-raising efforts.

Ontario's students deserve a public education system that provides a safe, nurturing learning environment. Ontario's teachers and education workers are committed to building up our education system and creating the best possible learning conditions. For too long, however, their efforts have been hampered by the growing problem of violence. This violence is not about bad kids. It's about a system that fails students by perpetuating oppressive systems such as racism, sexism, and severe income inequality. It also fails them by not providing the funding necessary to ensure students have

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access to child and youth workers, educational assistants, early childhood educators, psychologists and other supportive professionals when they need them. Presenters and participants at the Safe at School Summit articulated the connections between big picture, social factors and school-level interventions. We need to continue making those connections for parents, allies, and decision-makers.

OSSTF/FEESO looks forward to working with you to make that happen.

See who attended the Safe School Summit!
(All responses were collected via Menti)

Administrative Assistant, Behaviour Analyst, Child and Youth Worker, Developmental Service Worker, Early Childhood Educator, Educational Assistant, ESSP Representative, ETFO, Vice President—ETFO, Executive—OSSTF/FEESO, Executive VP—Canadian Labour Congress, General Secretary—AEFO, Health and Safety Officer, Joint Health and Safety Committee Representative, Local President—Unifor, Occupational Therapist, Ontario Principal's Council, OPHEA, OSSTF/FEESO Health and Safety Committee, Parent, Political staff, Vice President—Labour Council, Vice President—Educational Assistants Association, President—Educational Assistants Association, President—Ontario Federation of Labour (and proud Educational Assistant), President—OSBCU/CUPE, President or Representative—OSSTF/FEESO District or Bargaining Unit, President—OTF/FEO, Présidente locale—AEFO, Professional Student Support Personnel, RECE, Regional Organizer, Registered Behaviour Analyst, Researcher, Researcher (work and health), Safe Schools Social Worker, Social Worker, Teacher, Union Staff (OSSTF/FEESO, ERWA, AEFO, OTF/FEO, CTF/FCE), Vice President, Ontario Autism Coalition, Workers Health and Safety Centre, Leader—Ontario NDP, Leader—Ontario Liberal Party, Leader—Green Part of Ontario, Community Engagement Officer, White Ribbon Campaign, Director—Ontario Autism Coalition, Vice President—Educational Resource Workers Association (Dufferin Peel), People for Education, Communicative Disorders Assistant, Restorative Practice Facilitator

This document sets out our priorities for combatting workplace violence in education. We look forward to working with you and to continuing to commit to the essential work of protecting safe, quality, public education in Ontario.

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