

Beyond the Breaking Point

Violence Against Saskatchewan's Education Sector Workers

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We are hitting crisis level. There is not enough training for school staff and not enough support for children. The effects are teacher and support staff burnout. The stress of having violent children in the classroom is constant. Staff become on edge, children become on edge and fearful.

- Teacher

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Educator Violence



Beyond the Breaking Point

Violence Against Saskatchewan's Education Sector Workers

Over the last decade, workplace violence in the education sector has increasingly been acknowledged as a serious social problem that impacts workers, students, and society at large (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Lanthier et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2014). At the same time, it would appear that little is being done to remedy the situation, and even less to address underlying issues. The title of this report – *Beyond the Breaking Point: Violence Against Saskatchewan's Education Sector Workers* – speaks to the urgency of the crisis and the need for immediate and meaningful action.

This report is divided into four substantive sections: Violence, Harassment, Responses, and Impacts. Throughout, we attend to diverse occupational groups – teachers, direct student support workers (e.g., Educational Assistants, Early Childhood Educators), and indirect student support workers (e.g., custodial workers, clerical staff) – as well as the unique experiences of equity-deserving and sovereignty-seeking groups (e.g., women, Indigenous, disabled, racially minoritized, and/or 2SLGBTQIA+). Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data, we endeavour to balance the importance of statistical data with the imperative to amplify the words and insights of education sector workers. This report draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Methodological approach

Between October 16 and December 30, 2023, 828 Saskatchewan education sector workers completed the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey*. The mixed methods questionnaire asked participants about their experiences of, and the responses to, workplace violence (i.e., acts, attempts, and threats of physical force) and harassment (e.g., slurs, insults, and put-downs) in the 2022-2023 school year. The quantitative data analysis for this report was generated using SAS/STAT software, Version 9.4. Open-ended questions were thematically coded using NVivo software, Version 14, and subsequently subjected to horizontal and vertical analysis.

A note on the language of violence

In this report, we use the language of violence – much of which is perpetrated by students. Recognizing that education sector workers experience student-initiated workplace violence is not paramount to saying students are violent in the conventional sense of forming intent. Indeed, children who are lashing out may well be victims of social and structural forces which deny them access to the supports and resources they need to thrive.

The research team

In 2018, Drs. Chris Bruckert and Darcy Santor (University of Ottawa) launched the *Violence and Harassment Against Educators Project*. Chris Bruckert is a professor of criminology and Darcy Santor is a practicing clinical psychologist and a professor of psychology. Two doctoral students are also on the team: Darby Mallory (Criminology) and Hanya Ismail (Clinical Psychology). More information about our research can be found at: www.educatorviolence.ca.

Recommended citation

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Survey Demographics

Gender: Education is a woman-dominated occupation. It is therefore not surprising that 86% of participants identified as women, 13% identified as men, and 1% identified as other (e.g., Two-Spirited, non-binary, gender-fluid).

Race: The sample was overwhelmingly white (89%); 9% identified as Indigenous and only 2% identified as racially minoritized (e.g., Black, Middle Eastern, East Asian).

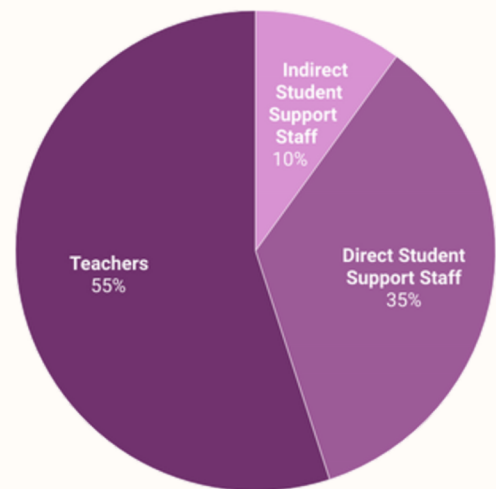
Disability: While most of the sample did not identify as having a disability, 21% identified as having a diagnosed mental illness, 9% a neurodevelopmental disorder, and 3% a physical disability. In addition, 3% of our sample indicated they had a learning disability.

Age and Experience: The sample skewed towards seasoned workers: 33% were between the ages of 41 and 50, and 28% were over 50. In addition, 12% were between the ages of 31 and 40, and 12% were under 30. The average number of years worked in the education sector was 14.5.

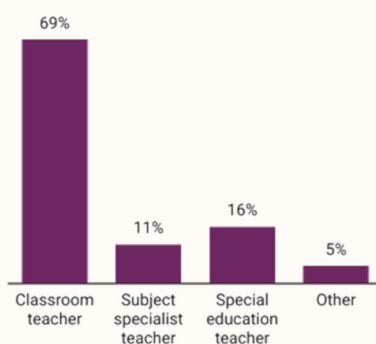
2SLGBTQIA+: Individuals from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were underrepresented in the sample relative to the general population – just 6% identified as 2SLGBTQIA+.

Occupational Groupings: Recognizing the range of labour processes and practices in the education sector, the survey grouped participants' primary positions into the following categories:

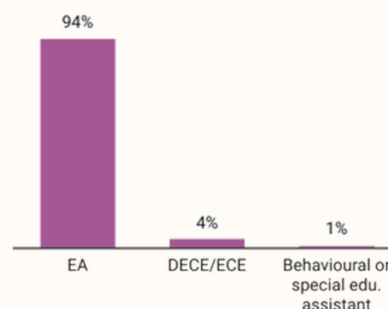
1. Teachers (e.g., Classroom Teacher, Special Education Teacher, Substitute Teacher)
2. Direct Student Support Staff other than teacher (e.g., Early Childhood Educator [ECE], Educational Assistant [EA], Child and Youth Worker)
3. Indirect Student Support Staff (e.g., Custodial Worker, Clerical Worker, Bus Driver)



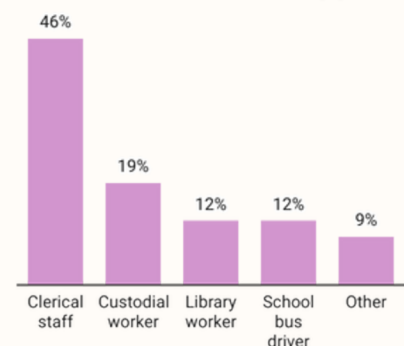
1. Teachers



2. Direct Student Support (other than teachers)



3. Indirect Student Support





Section 1: *Violence*

“

In the past year, I've been punched in the face, had push pins held to my eyeballs, and scissors held to my throat. There were more than one that really affected me but one in particular was when the student flipped a table, choked me with my lanyard, and repeatedly threw a chair into the wall. They then threw the chair through the window and started kicking my shins and butt.

- Educational Assistant

”

1.1

RATES OF EDUCATOR-DIRECTED VIOLENCE ARE SHOCKING

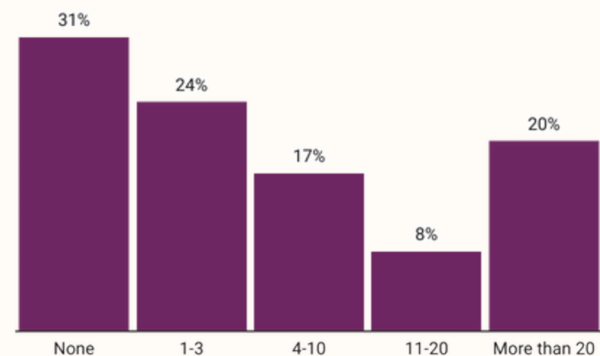
Violence in schools is usually framed in relation to student-on-student bullying, but schools are also workplaces that should be safe and violence-free. This does not appear to be the case. Fully, 84% of Saskatchewan education sector workers reported experiencing at least one act, attempt, or threat of physical force from any of the four sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators) during the 2022-2023 school year. For most, violence was a recurring experience: workers reported an average of 19.8 unique instances of acts, attempts, and/or threats of physical force during the 2022-2023 school year.

“Multiple times a day students are punching, kicking, hair pulling, and hitting [school employees]. These incidents are so common and they are intensifying. The scary thing is this is normal.” – Educational Assistant

Overwhelmingly, the violence is student-initiated

- 69% of respondents experienced one act of physical force from a student, with one in five (20%) reporting more than 20 unique acts.
- Almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents experienced one attempt of physical force from a student.
- 67% of participants reported one threat of physical force from a student.
- One in four (26%) reported more than 20 attempts of physical force from a student.

Student-initiated acts of physical force



Surprisingly, parent-initiated threats are not uncommon

1 in 5

workers reported a threat of physical force from a parent

“

I was just asking [the mother] to have a seat and offered her a drink, but she just started to pound my breast/shoulders/chest area. I hoped someone would help – another secretary was around but she was hiding. Nothing was said nor done, and the day resumed as if nothing had happened. I had minimal abrasions and bruises – nothing big enough to complain about. And since I’m on call/casual, I’ve let it go because I didn’t want to be called less often.

– Clerical Worker

”

1.2

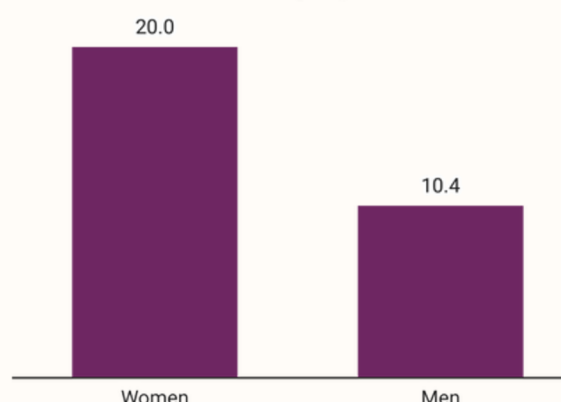
WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IS GENDERED VIOLENCE

“I rarely if ever see the same level of violence directed towards my male colleagues.” - Educational Assistant

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Bruckert et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019; Santor et al. 2019), the current survey found that women education sector workers are more likely to experience workplace violence than their co-workers who identify as men. Fully, 91% of women education sector workers reported one or more acts, attempts, or threats of physical force from a student, compared to 81% of men. Moreover, not only are women more likely to experience violence but they also report dramatically more incidents: on average, women experienced 20 unique acts, attempts, or threats of physical force from a student in the 2022-2023 school year, whereas men reported an average of 10 unique instances. Participants described feeling *“more vulnerable”* (Teacher), hypothesized that women are viewed as *“easier targets”* (EA), and suggested they are subjected to gendered behaviours: *“Male students often try to intimidate first. There are many female employees that face the intimidation from male students daily”* (Teacher).

Workers also explained that the societal devaluation of women seeps into the school environment. Quite simply, *“many of the students do not respect women”* (Teacher). Importantly, not only is vulnerability gendered but participants noted that gendered tropes of women as overly emotional are sometimes mobilized to negate women’s experiences: *“Because I am a woman educational assistant, I am viewed as overreacting to inappropriate sexual behaviour. If this student abused a male staff member, especially a teacher, swift action would have been taken.”*

Average number of instances of student-initiated physical force



“

I feel as though some students see female teachers (particularly substitute teachers) as easier to push buttons with. Unfortunately, it sometimes results in very inappropriate or even violent behaviour creeping into the learning space.

– Teacher

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“

As a short female, others often try to intimidate me by getting into my space and making threats. There is a lot of verbal confrontation, waving hands, and fists in my face.

– Teacher

”

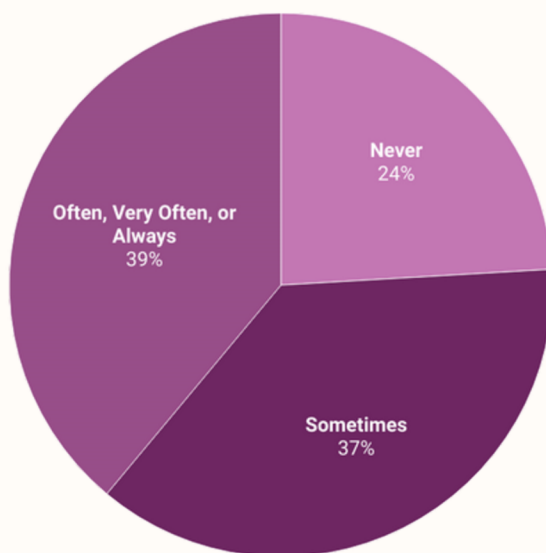
1.3

THE NEW NORMAL: WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IS “PART OF THE JOB”

“The amount of violence in schools is becoming ‘normal’. Our government is unwilling to recognize it as a problem. They refer to incidents of violence as nothing more than ‘slips, trips, and falls’. I find that insulting and shameful.” – Teacher

Evidently, rates of violence against workers in Saskatchewan’s education sector are outrageously high. Indeed, it would appear that student-initiated violence is so pervasive – *“it happens every single day at my school”* (Teacher) – that it is increasingly normalized as simply *“part of the job”* (Educational Assistant). Participants noted that violence has become the *“new normal”* (Educational Assistant), so widespread that for some it is a routine aspect of their workday: *“I am so used to seeing the hitting, biting, pinching, throwing objects, yelling, head butting, running around the school”* (Educational Assistant). Disturbingly, teachers and direct student support workers report being told by administrators that *“it was [their] job to deal with the violent situations”* (Teacher) and *“given the message that it was part of [their] job description”* (Teacher). Indeed, some respondents noted that they have *“learned to accept that hitting, biting, humping, pinching, gross talk, and sexual abuse is just part of [their] job”* (Early Childhood Educator). This normalization of workplace violence operates in conjunction with the widespread minimization of the violence workers experience – the above-noted *“slips, trips, and falls”* – and relatedly, a negation of its harms. Notably, three-quarters of respondents (76%) indicated that the violence and/or harassment they experienced had been minimized by an administrator or supervisor at least once, and only 24% indicated they ‘never’ felt an incident had been minimized.

Minimization of violence and harassment by administrators/supervisors



“I am disgusted that we are made to believe by our superiors that [violence] is normal and acceptable behaviour from students.”
– Educational Assistant

“It has become an expected part of the job. It should not be normalized. People outside of the education system need to know what is happening in schools.”
– Teacher

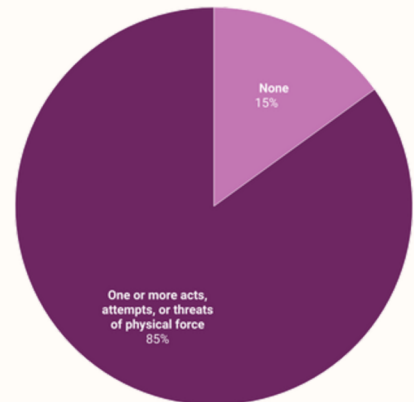
1.4

WITNESSES EXPERIENCE FEAR, FRUSTRATION, AND FURY

“Witnessing another employee get abused is discouraging, demeaning, soul-sucking, and stress-inducing.” - Educational Assistant

The astonishingly high rates of student-initiated violence, coupled with normalization (see 1.3), inevitably means that many workers in Saskatchewan schools will witness workplace violence. It is sadly unsurprising, therefore, that 85% of participants witnessed at least one student-initiated act, attempt, or threat of physical force against a co-worker in the 2022-2023 school year (averaging ten such incidents). Moreover, one in three (32%) witnessed at least one parent-initiated act, attempt, or threat of physical force against a colleague. It is important to recognize that, as research on healthcare professionals has demonstrated, there are serious and enduring impacts of witnessing workplace violence (Jeffery & Fuller, 2016; Opie et al., 2010; Tee et al., 2016). The qualitative data revealed that these experiences evoke interrelated emotions, including anxiety and feelings of powerlessness and frustration because of their inability to intervene; anger at the situation and lack of actions taken; concern for the well-being of their co-workers; and fear for their colleagues, students, and themselves. Participants also explained that witnessing violence directed at a co-worker impacted their ability to do their job either because they took time away from other tasks to support their colleagues and/or the student witnesses, because they themselves were distraught and destabilized, or because the violence engendered a hyper-vigilance incompatible with the attention required to perform their jobs.

Witnessing student-initiated violence against co-workers



“Many times I have seen my EAs experiencing violence from students while I’m teaching and they’re trying to redirect behaviour. I step in and reinforce, as that often helps, but it leaves the other 25 students without instruction, guidance, etc.”

– Teacher

“

Witnessing violence directed at another school employee was a normal part of our week last year. I had a very hard time watching students be violent toward the EAs in my classroom and I found myself stepping in to support. I feel like we all got very close last year, but trauma bonding should never be the reason your team grows closer. Witnessing the violence has had a lasting effect on my mental and physical well-being but it has also made me question how long I will last in a profession that I have worked so hard to achieve and was once my biggest passion in life.

– Teacher

”

“

It made me feel powerless. My coworker dealt with violence daily. Her mental health declined. Other students felt scared at times. It made me angry because there was nothing that we, as support staff, could do. My experience is that we are not taken seriously when we voice our concerns.

– Educational Assistant

”



Section 2: *Harassment*

“

Several teachers, including myself, have been clamouring for something to be done to head off the obvious increases in racism, anti-Islamic sentiments, and anti-LGBTQ2S hate put forth by students. Frankly, it does not seem to be taken seriously by admin who act helpless to stop it. Terrible.

- Teacher

”

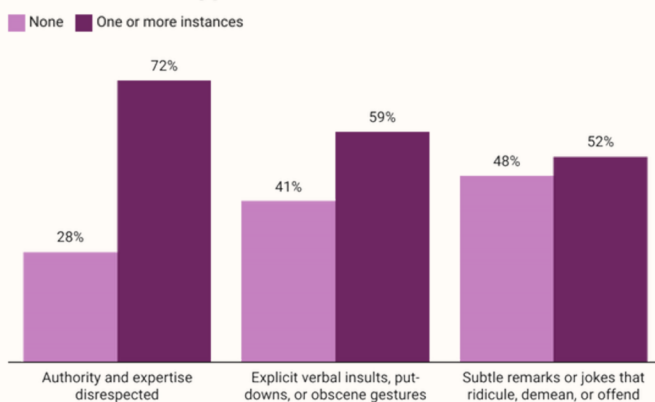
2.1

7 OUT OF EVERY 8 WORKERS EXPERIENCE HARASSMENT

Rates of harassment against education sector workers in Saskatchewan schools are exceptionally high: 87% of workers experienced harassment at least once from any of the four sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators/supervisors) during the 2022-2023 school year. Experiences of harassment were often not isolated events – respondents reported an average of 34 unique instances. The repetitive and pervasive nature of these behaviours was noted by many participants: *“I was called very rude names and sworn at almost daily by one of my students”* (Teacher); *“I was continually called a ‘stupid b****,’ often told to ‘shut the f*** up,’ and given the middle finger countless times”* (Educational Assistant).

Most often, education sector workers reported that the harassment was student-initiated: 78% reported one or more instances of harassment from a student. These behaviours frequently involved a refusal to respect authority, swearing, and offensive remarks. For example, one teacher shared that *“every week, students are screaming profanities, walking out of the classroom, and continually contesting my teaching.”*

Most common types of student-initiated harassment



Alarming, one in six participants (18%) reported at least one instance of sexual harassment from a student, primarily inappropriate sexual remarks, threats, and attempts. One Educational Assistant described how *“a male student pinned [her] into a corner [and] attempted to kiss [her] repeatedly,”* and another wrote about *“a student [making] threats of violence and sexual assault.”*

Harassment from colleagues and administrators/supervisors:

While less common than student-initiated harassment, education sector workers also experience harassment from colleagues and administrators/supervisors. Participants described being *“belittled,” “criticized,” “humiliated,”* and *“questioned”* by other school employees. Indeed, more than a third of respondents reported having their authority or expertise disrespected by an administrator/supervisor (34%) and even more experienced such behaviour from a colleague (40%).

Workers reported an average of 5.6 instances of colleague-initiated harassment in a single school year.

“

A colleague went out of her way to campaign against me because she did not like the way I teach. She called into question my competency to other co-workers, including substitutes, and told my administrator I was not doing my job.

– Teacher

”

2.2

STUDENT HARASSMENT: EDUCATORS' IDENTITIES MATTER

"I cannot disclose to the staff or students that I am of First Nations descent because of prejudice." – Teacher

Previous research has established that identity markers (e.g., gender, race, disability) condition an individual's vulnerability to, and experience of, workplace violence (Hollis, 2022; Lanthier et al., 2018). Our analysis reveals that educators who identify as Indigenous and those reporting a diagnosed mental illness experience higher rates and greater frequencies of harassment from students.

Indigenous education sector workers experience more frequent verbal insults and offensive remarks from students

Indigenous educators were more frequent targets of student-initiated harassment. White education sector workers reported an average of 4.7 explicit verbal insults, put-downs and obscene gestures from students during the 2022-2023 school year, whereas Indigenous respondents experienced 7.3 instances. An analysis showed a similar pattern of results for subtle remarks, jokes, or innuendo that ridicule, demean, or offend. Indigenous respondents experienced, on average, 5.9 instances of such behaviour from students compared to their white colleagues who reported 3.9 instances.

“

Being Indigenous and working in a rural Saskatchewan school is very hard.

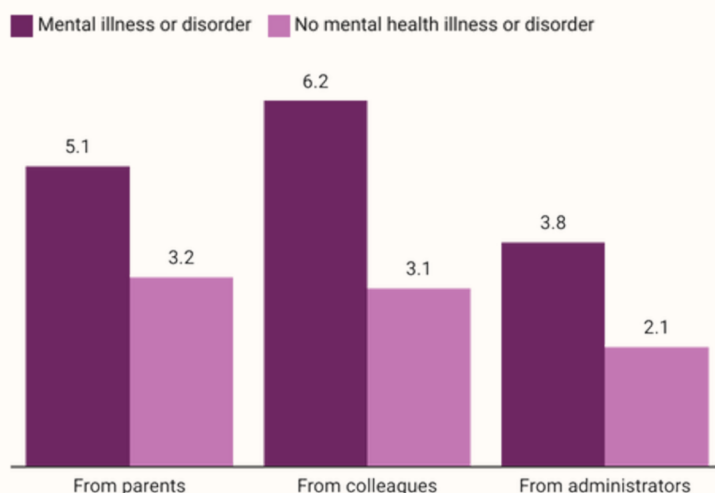
– Educational Assistant

”

Education sector workers with a reported diagnosed mental illness experienced high rates and more frequent harassment from students

Saskatchewan education sector workers who identified as having a mental illness experienced substantially more frequent harassment. In a single year, workers with a mental health disorder experienced 33 unique instances of harassment from various sources, compared to 20 experienced by colleagues without a mental illness. These differences remained true when we looked at the experiences from each source examined (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators). For example, workers with a mental illness experienced 17.9 instances of student-initiated harassment whereas their colleagues without a mental illness reported 11.7.

Average number of instances of harassment: Group comparison



2.3

TEACHERS & CLERICAL STAFF AT HIGHEST RISK OF PARENT HARASSMENT

Rates of parent-initiated harassment against education sector workers are striking. During the 2022-2023 school year, more than half (54%) of education sector workers experienced harassment from parents; these incidents occurred an average of 5.5 times. Further analyses revealed significant differences in experiences across education sector occupations, with teachers and clerical workers experiencing the highest rates of parent-initiated harassment. Indeed, when teachers and clerical staff are removed from the sample, the rate of parent-initiated harassment dropped to 27%.

Teachers

Remarkably, nearly three-quarters (73%) of teachers faced harassment from parents at least once in the 2022-2023 school year; on average, they experienced 7.5 unique instances. A recurrent theme amongst teachers was parents' perception of the educator's incompetence playing out in aggressive emails, accusatory interactions, public chastisements, and denigrating social media posts. Teachers also spoke about parents yelling and threatening them during phone calls, meetings, and unscheduled visits.

“ I have experienced violent threats from a student, but I was more negatively affected by the actions of a parent who would threaten to report us, slander us on social media, and try to turn other parents against us in our small community. She'd yell, accuse, and storm out of meetings, and then she'd corner one of us, invade our personal space, and continue to accuse and indirectly threaten. There are more and more parents who exhibit these extreme, negative behaviours. It's devastating to be treated so badly, even though you know your colleagues are experiencing it too. I'm now looking to take a year off from teaching and possibly leave the profession.

– Teacher

”

Clerical Workers

Disturbingly, 56% of clerical workers reported harassment by a parent(s) in the 2022-2023 school year. While the harassment teachers experience is often rooted in parents' assessment of their pedagogic/professional practices, clerical staff's vulnerability to parent-initiated harassment is largely an artifact of working in the front office. Clerical workers are usually the first point of contact for parents who may be concerned and/or aggravated: “Parents/guardians come into the office, yelling and swearing because they are upset about a matter” (Clerical Worker). Moreover, clerical workers fulfill a gatekeeping role: informing parents that they must remain in the office until the teacher or administrator is available.

“ Mostly, it is parents that don't understand that they have to wait a moment: teachers are teaching, they can't take calls all the time [and] principals have many other responsibilities - they can't be at your beck and call. Plus, teleportation hasn't been invented yet, so they need to actually walk to the office. Hitting me or calling me names won't make this go any faster.

– Clerical Worker

”

2.4

2SLGBTQIA+ WORKERS NAVIGATE WIDESPREAD DISCRIMINATION

Hostility, prejudice, and bias against members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in Saskatchewan schools are significant issues that manifest as:

- 1 Disproportionate levels of harassment by parents:** Compared to 54% of all participants, fully 72% of 2SLGBTQIA+ workers were harassed by parents; meaning, they are 33% more likely to experience parent-initiated harassment. One teacher wrote, *“being a queer educator during this time of ‘parental rights’ regarding trans students, and the mis- and disinformation surrounding 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion has made me wary about being visible in school. I have been made aware of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ comments made by parents within the school.”*
- 2 Dramatically higher rates of student-initiated sexual harassment:** Shockingly, 2SLGBTQIA+ workers were twice as likely to experience sexual harassment from a student (34%) compared to workers who did not so identify (17%). Moreover, the harassment often pivoted on their sexual or gender identity: *“I have had students make slurs or rude comments about 2SLGBTQ+ people around me and to me. I have had students tear down my queer flags and posters”* (Teacher).
- 3 Homophobic and transphobic mobilization against 2SLGBTQIA+ rights:** Workers reported a wide range of subtle and overt discrimination. For example, participants wrote of *“students and parents boycotting pride month”* (Teacher) and *“parents threatening LGBTQ+ initiatives”* (Teacher). These actions affirm outsider status, and engender fear and insecurity in workers: *“As a non-straight person in a conservative area, I’m scared of experiencing a hate crime at least twice a week”* (Teacher).
- 4 Pressures to conceal sexual orientation or gender identity:** 2SLGBTQIA+ community members’ ability to be forthright about their sexual orientation or gender identity is undermined by wellfounded fears for personal safety and career repercussions (see 3.4), or because they were *“discouraged by [their] employer.”* One teacher explained, *“I feel pressure to hide a part of who I am. My sexual orientation doesn’t impact my work; yet I am made to feel ashamed meanwhile my straight colleagues don’t need to hide their marriages from staff, supervisors, students, and families.”*
- 5 Hostile work environment:** A toxic work environment is created when 2SLGBTQIA+ workers: experience elevated rates of harassment from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators; are unable to disclose their sexual orientation; face higher rates of reprisals (see 3.4) and blame (see 3.1); and are condemned for teaching or talking about 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. One teacher wrote, *“I’ve had colleagues/admin/parents inform me (by yelling or threatening) that it is morally inappropriate to discuss LGBTQ issues with students.”*

“My entire career, I have needed to compartmentalize my life. No matter what initiatives happen, it is still not a safe place to embrace and celebrate my identity and family structure.”

– Teacher



Section 3: *Responses*

“

*We are told to ‘see the good in them’.
We do. We love our students. But we
can't fix everything and we certainly
can't do it alone which is what
Division expects of us.*

– Teacher

”

3.1

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES ARE INADEQUATE

The high rates of student-initiated violence (see 1.1) and harassment (see 2.1) begs the question: *what are the institutional responses?* The research revealed a range of reactive, proactive, deflective, and dismissive responses.

Reactive Responses

Participants described several ways administrators responded to student-initiated violence and/or harassment by imposing consequences. These, at times punitive, repercussions encompassed a range of actions including verbal reprimands, mandated apologies, short-term removals from class, suspensions, and police involvement. Although beyond the scope of the current project, it is important to remember that sanctions (e.g., suspensions) are disproportionately imposed on Indigenous and racially minoritized students (TDSB, 2020; WSD, 2021).

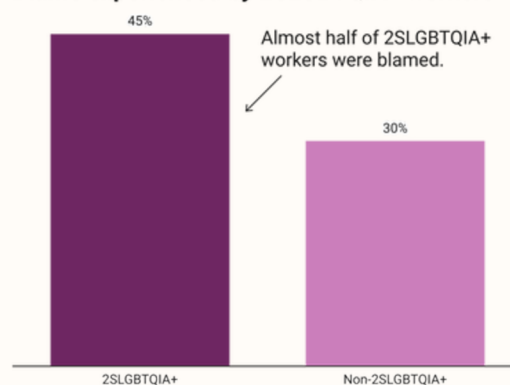
Proactive Responses

Unlike the punitive or deterrent philosophies that inform reactive responses, proactive interventions (e.g., behaviour management plans, safety plans, additional resources) endeavour to prevent or minimize the risk of future problematic behaviours. Notably, only 11% of respondents indicated that safety plans were ‘always’ put in place (or updated) following violent incidents and 20% reported this was ‘often’ the case. Similar findings emerge in relation to behaviour management strategies: 8% of participants indicated behaviour management strategies were ‘always’ put in place (or updated) following instances of harassment and 21% said this was ‘often’ done.

Deflective Responses

Participants reported that administrators and supervisors sometimes respond by shifting responsibility onto education sector workers. Indeed, almost one in three participants (32%) indicated they were blamed for student-initiated violence or harassment at least once in the 2022-2023 school year. This responsabilization often manifests in faulting workers’ actions, attire and hairstyles (e.g., ponytails that were pulled), lack of personal protective equipment, or professional approaches: “Admin just said try not to let the student get close, yet you have to be close otherwise he would throw things, pull hair, and try to bite other students” (Educational Assistant).

Blame experienced by 2SLGBTQIA+ workers



Dismissive Responses

Qualitative analysis suggests that, by far, the most common response to workplace violence and harassment is “nothing” or “very little.” Participants described having their concerns negated and incidents being routinely “swept under the rug.” For example, one teacher wrote: “Throughout the year one student would pinch, kick, bite, scratch, [and] pull my hair daily. Most days, my EA and I reported being attacked more than 30 times. Nothing was done. I felt hopeless.” That said, there was also considerable recognition that inadequate resources inhibit the ability to enact meaningful measures: “The answer is always ‘this child should be in a different program’ – but there are no spaces available and there are long waitlists. So we have to deal with the students as best we can. If that means we get kicked or hit every day, then that is what it is” (Educational Assistant).

3.2

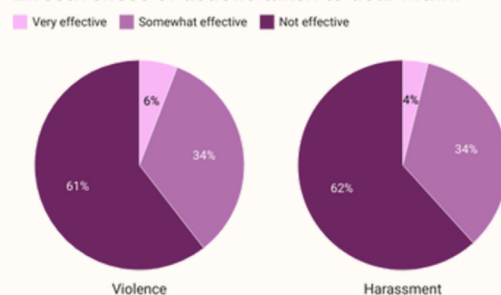
THE STATUS QUO IS NOT WORKING

Most institutional responses to workplace violence and harassment are reactive, deflective, or dismissive (see 3.1). While less frequent, proactive measures have the potential to concretely address issues of violence and harassment; in practice, this does not appear to be the case. Less than 5% of respondents felt that safety plans were ‘very effective’ strategies while nearly half of respondents (44%) said they were just ‘somewhat effective’ or ‘not effective’. It is worth noting that the potential effectiveness of proactive responses (e.g., safety plans) is compromised by the chronic lack of resources in schools: *“We simply don't have enough resources, space, or manpower to actually apply any safety plans or proactive prevention plans because we're always short-staffed and spread thin fighting fires”* (Educational Assistant).

Institutional responses are NOT effective!

Most participants (61%) said that the actions taken to deal with instances of violence they experienced were ‘ineffective’; just 6% reported ‘very effective’ actions were taken.

Effectiveness of actions taken to deal with...



“
I don't know what the answer is, but the system right now is not working and will crumble if it continues as it is.
”
- Teacher

Education sector workers show up for each other!

In the context where workplace violence against education sector workers is normalized (see 1.3), the response is all too often to “do nothing” (see 3.1) and even proactive strategies are ineffective (see above), it is notable that 54% of participants indicated they were treated ‘fairly’ by their administrators/supervisors. While Division officials, superintendents, and upper administrators were routinely described as being “condescending,” “unsupportive,” and “out of touch,” many felt that their administrators/supervisors were “very supportive” (e.g., filling out forms, debriefs, check-ins, intervening with the student). At the same time, participants acknowledged the constraints administrators navigate, including limited human and fiscal resources: *“My principal did try to help me, but there were many other students in our school, in other classes doing the same types of things and she was getting no support from her superintendent”* (Teacher). Administrators’ assistance operated in conjunction with co-workers’ support: *“The most supportive people were my colleagues. They were consistently checking in on me. My EA and I were always there for each other. We developed such a close bond due to all the issues our school faced; we really relied on one another”* (Teacher).

“
I received support in the form of listening and problem-solving but no actionable support. Superintendents and those farthest removed from the situation gave the least support meanwhile those with skin in the game and boots on the ground gave the most support.
”
- Teacher

3.3

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS IS UNDER-REPORTED

The Saskatchewan Employment Act and Occupational Health and Safety Regulations mandate employers and employees report and respond to workplace violence. Nevertheless, most instances of workplace violence and harassment in Saskatchewan schools are not formally reported. Concerningly, 8% of respondents indicated that they were ‘not authorized to fill out violent incident, workplace violence, or safe school reports’.

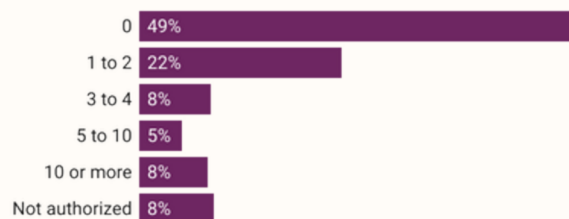
Formal reporting

Over forty percent of the sample (43%) formally reported at least one incident of violence or harassment, with over half of these (52%) reporting just one to two instances. Nearly half (49%) of participants did not report any instances of violence or harassment in the 2022-2023 school year; 64% indicated at least one of these instances should have been reported but was not.

Reasons for not formally reporting

Participants indicated several reasons why they did not formally report instances of violence or harassment, the most common of which were: that it would not result in changes or improvements (28%), that the incident was too minor to warrant a report (24%), or that they lacked the time to file a report due to routine workplace demands (21%).

Instances of workplace violence and harassment formally reported



“

My supervisor is supportive when it comes to reporting, often filling out forms for us to save us time in our day. As a female EA, reporting often feels futile and like a waste of time as very little changes. We know the importance of doing it, though, since if it isn't reported, in a way, it didn't happen.

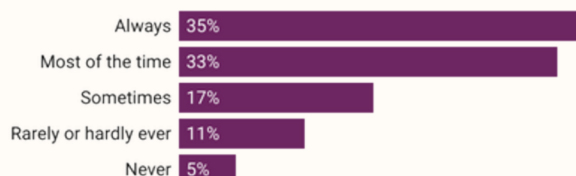
– Educational Assistant

”

Informal reporting

In contrast to low rates of formal reporting, our research found high rates of informal reporting: more than two-thirds of respondents (68%) ‘always’ or ‘often’ informed their administrator or supervisor about an instance of workplace violence or harassment. The remaining 17% indicated they ‘sometimes’ informed their administrator or supervisor; just 15% said they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ informally reported instances of workplace violence or harassment.

Instances of workplace violence and harassment informally reported



Reasons for not informally reporting

The most common reasons participants indicated they did not informally report workplace violence or harassment were: that the incident was too minor (27%), that talking to an administrator or supervisor would not be helpful (22%), or that they lacked the time to file a report due to routine workplace demands (19%).

3.4

REPRISAL RISK IS 3 TIMES HIGHER FOR DISABLED & 2SLGBTQIA+ WORKERS

Negative actions taken against employees for engaging in legally protected activities (e.g., reporting workplace violence) constitute workplace reprisals. One in twenty (5%) Saskatchewan education sector workers experienced retaliatory actions from administrators/supervisors after they (formally or informally) reported workplace violence and/or harassment. These reprisals included involuntary changes to job duties, school transfers, verbal reprimands, and other disciplinary actions. One Educational Assistant described her experience: *“I was told that I would be moved schools after the incident of harassment. I was only given one day’s notice of the move. I was made to feel like I was doing something wrong for standing up for myself [and] I was made to feel that I would get into trouble if I took any time off for my health needs.”*

“I was yelled at, reprimanded in front of other staff members, talked down to, brushed off [and] treated as if I was a nuisance.”

– Teacher

Risk of reprisals is conditioned by identity

Consistent with existing literature demonstrating that vulnerability to reprisals is conditioned by identity markers (e.g., Kurdo & Rothbard, 2023; Tung & Padin, 2020), Saskatchewan education sector workers reporting a diagnosed mental illness and those identifying as 2SLGBTQIA+ were at least three times more likely to experience reprisals for reporting workplace violence and/or harassment.

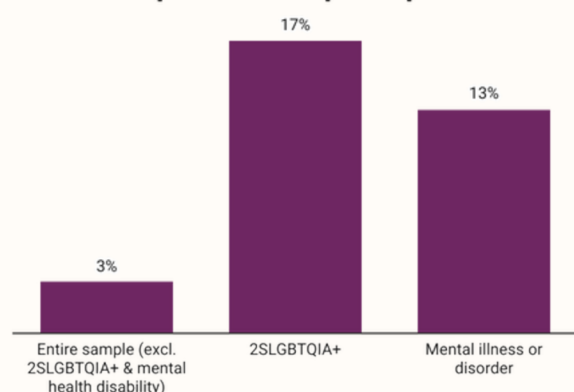
One in eight workers reporting a diagnosed mental illness experienced a reprisal

Compared to 4% of those without a mental illness or disorder, 13% of respondents who reported a diagnosed mental health disability experienced a reprisal for reporting workplace violence and/or harassment.

One in six workers belonging to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community experienced a reprisal

Compared to 5% of workers who did not identify as 2SLGBTQIA+, 17% of education sector workers who are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community experienced a reprisal for reporting workplace violence and/or harassment.

Rates of reprisals: Group comparison



“It seems that once I exposed myself as part of the LGBTQ2S community all career opportunities for advancement or professional challenges ceased to happen for me. Within our schools, there are no visible leaders that are represented by diversity of any sort. I just hope that the environment in schools significantly improves in the future.”

– Teacher



Section 4: *Impacts*

“

We are exhausted, overworked, stressed, anxious, forgetful, and then expected to be accommodating, accepting, and inclusive of the students that are causing us distress. Our students who witness these events are traumatized. They're scared, anxious, upset, and frustrated. Plus, the students with [problematic] behaviours are becoming isolated from their peers which causes them to face even more issues and challenges.

– Teacher

”

4.1

THE PROFESSIONAL COSTS ARE SIGNIFICANT

High rates of violence and harassment, coupled with the normalization and minimization of student-initiated violence, the lack of effective solutions, the risk of reprisals for reporting, and the chronic state of underfunding, collectively take a substantial toll on education sector workers' personal lives (see 4.2), their families (see 4.3), and students in the classroom (see 4.4). There are also extensive professional costs for workers, including feeling burnt out, less enthusiastic, and dissatisfied with their jobs.

Burnout

Participants were asked questions designed to screen for burnout at work, including if they felt (1) tired or exhausted, (2) uninterested or disengaged, (3) negative or cynical, and (4) less effective or unproductive. More than one in five respondents (22%) would be designated as meeting the formal criteria for burnout; an additional 24% would be considered at risk. In the words of one educator: *"I used to love teaching. I was an excellent teacher. I am not an excellent teacher anymore. I am too burnt out, exhausted, and defeated to be that teacher anymore."*

Less enthusiasm

The majority of respondents (67%) disagreed with the statement: 'I have as much enthusiasm now as I did when I began my job/career'. Educators spoke of having less passion, more frustration, and feeling disillusioned by the widespread violence and harassment (and its negation). These feelings contributed to a lack of enthusiasm towards their work; as one teacher wrote, *"I love working with kids but I'm exhausted and have completely lost my passion for teaching. I am already so burnt out at the age of 25."*

Job dissatisfaction

Almost one in four respondents (24%) 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' with the statement: 'I am happy to be working in the education sector'. One educational assistant wrote: *"I went home with bruises, migraines, and my mental health was at an all-time low. I wanted nothing more than to leave my position as I was getting absolutely ZERO help and ZERO resources from administration."* And a teacher wrote: *"I contemplated quitting teaching and suicide more times than I care to admit. I love my profession, but no longer feel valued, safe, or supported."*

Professional costs translate into societal costs...

Over half of respondents (52%) said they would leave the profession if they could get an equally well-paying job. This sentiment was expressed repeatedly by education sector workers, many of whom wrote about a desire to change jobs or leave the profession entirely. One teacher wrote: *"I am an excellent teacher. I was born to teach! I used to love my job. I am now planning on leaving this profession as soon as I can find a suitable replacement."* When highly trained and experienced workers abandon their careers, Saskatchewan schools are left short-staffed which not only increases already unmanageable workloads, but leaves students with even less resources and supports.

4.2

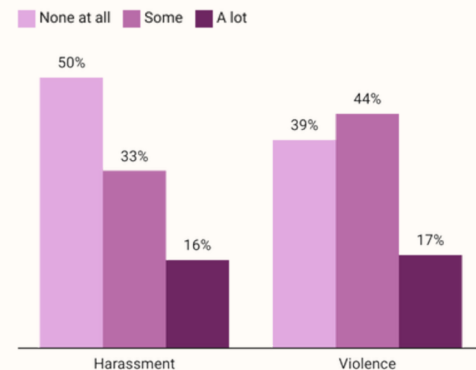
EDUCATORS' WELLBEING IS BEING COMPROMISED

Unsurprisingly, frequent exposure to violence and harassment in the workplace, combined with a lack of interventions, support, and resources, takes a toll on workers' well-being. For Saskatchewan's education sector workers, the effects on their physical and mental health are pronounced.

Physical Health Impacts

Student-initiated violence can cause physical injuries, ranging from bruises to dislocated or broken bones to concussions. For some workers, the impacts are permanent – including scarring, mobility limitations, and chronic pain. For others, the stress and anxiety of workplace violence and harassment manifests physiologically in, for example, over-eating, over-consuming alcohol, and/or over-sleeping. One teacher wrote: *“If my claims [of harassment] were believed and handled at the beginning of the year, I would not have had to go on leave, my mental health would be better, and I would not have gained the close to 45 lbs that I gained from the stress.”*

Physical health impacts



“

I quit teaching because I was diagnosed with PTSD after a long career. I’m a strong, intelligent person, so my diagnosis was quite upsetting. I was defeated. I was devastated. I have seen sadness and evilness within schools and have always tried to keep my students safe; I feel like I can not do it anymore. Because of this violence I quit my job, my career, my life. I am disgusted with our education system and disheartened by the government’s lack of funding. It’s not ok that I spent all my money and time to secure a career, only to lose it because it caused mental health issues. What am I supposed to do now? What are my students suppose to do now?

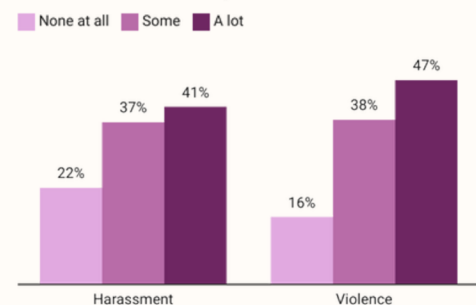
– Teacher

”

Mental Health Impacts

The majority of respondents (85%) reported that workplace violence impacts their mental health ‘somewhat’ (38%) or ‘a lot’ (47%). And, more than three in four (78%) indicated that harassment affects their mental health. Participants described a wide range of impacts, including being *“short-tempered,”* *“hyper-fixated on an incident,”* *“irritable with family,”* and *“physically sick from the stress of work.”* Many respondents also developed *“difficulties sleeping,”* *“anxiety,”* *“depression,”* and *“PTSD.”* An astounding number of participants wrote about being prescribed anti-anxiety and anti-depression medications, as well as accessing mental health services: *“I am seeing a psychiatrist and a counsellor, and I am on four different medications to deal with the fallout of these violent situations”* (Teacher). Notably, mental health resources are not equally accessible to all workers: *“I have not discussed the matter with a therapist. Substitutes are not provided coverage for this”* (Teacher).

Mental health impacts



4.3

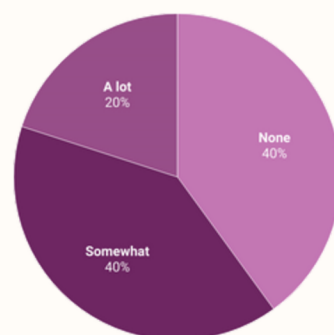
WORKPLACE VIOLENCE TAKES A HEAVY TOLL ON FAMILIES

“My loved ones get me at my worst, I feel like a ghost of the person I once was.” – Teacher








Workplace violence does not stay at work – it ripples through the lives of workers’ families with profound effects on their children and partners. Unsurprisingly, *“when a day at school is difficult, that can carry over into the home”* (Teacher). Indeed, 60% of survey respondents indicated that workplace violence negatively impacts (‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’) their personal relationships.

Education workers spoke of being *“exhausted at the end of the day and having little left in the tank for [their own] families”* (Educational Assistant). They described how their mental and physical exhaustion, coupled with stress and frustration, impacts their home life.

Impact of violent incidents on personal relationships



Families pay a price when workers are...

-  **Unable to do household tasks:** *“I am too tired to clean my house or cook a lot of days. My husband has been picking up the slack when I fall asleep”* (Educational Assistant).
-  **Withdrawn:** *“I was always SO tired and would sit in my room at home by myself. I couldn’t take care of myself, let alone my young children. I wanted to be by myself”* (Educational Assistant).
-  **Too drained for quality time with family:** *“I spent a lot of time being an angry and upset parent. I was withdrawn and relied too much on technology and I feel like I really lost precious developmental time with my child”* (Clerical Worker).
-  **Irritable:** *“I don’t have patience for my own young children. I am giving too much at work and have nothing left for home life”* (Teacher).
-  **Emotionally depleted:** *“I am a single mom of two teenagers. I’m struggling to support their emotional and mental needs because I’m completely tapped out when I get home”* (Teacher).
-  **Experiencing sensory overload:** *“I am often ‘touched out’ and sometimes find it difficult to positively engage with my family. I have less patience for my children”* (Educational Assistant).
-  **Socially isolated:** *“I don’t enjoy going out with friends because I’m exhausted from being in flight or fight mode all day at work”* (Teacher).

“

I’m either sad or snappy. I now flinch when there is a fast movement coming towards me, or when someone touches me without me seeing it coming. I refuse to talk about my day.

– Educational Assistant

”

4.4

STUDENTS ARE ACADEMICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY IMPACTED

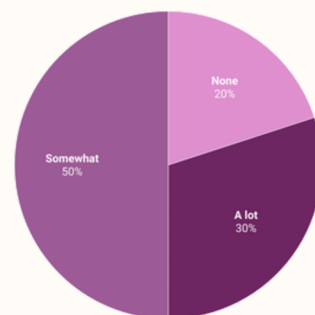
“Students were affected. They were either a) horrified and afraid or b) indifferent because they had seen it so many times. I could never focus my full attention on student learning – I always had one eye on behaviours to ensure my classroom was physically and emotionally safe.” – Teacher

Inevitably, high rates of violence against education sector workers negatively impact all members of the school community including, of course, students. The research identified three principal ways students are affected: access to instruction, capacity to learn, and emotional well-being.

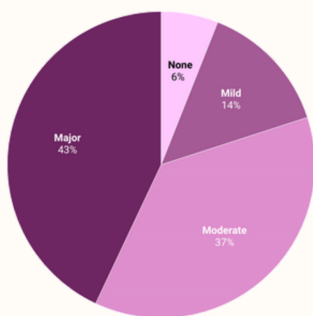
1) Access to instruction

When teachers are: hypervigilant about the potential of an outburst, dealing with an ongoing incident, or managing the aftermath of an episode, their ability to convey course materials is undermined. Similarly, when classrooms are disrupted and/or evacuated, instruction simply cannot take place. Notably, four in five teachers reported that workplace violence negatively impacted their ‘ability to do the job’. One teacher commented: *“It was a good day when the bell rang and I could say that I felt like I got to teach and students might have learned.”*

Negative impact of violence on teachers' ability to do their job



Negative impact of workplace violence on students' wellbeing



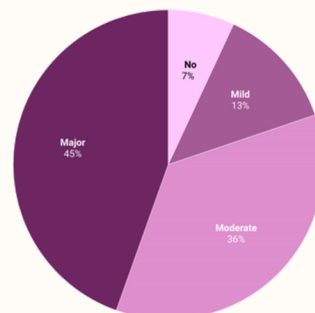
2) Emotional well-being

It is hard to overstate how destabilizing it is for students to routinely witness violence against their teachers and/or educational assistants. As one teacher wrote: *“The level of anxiety among students is absolutely visible,”* and another explained, *“other students are scared of the student, some cry and shake, others withdraw.”* Overwhelmingly, respondents described students as fearing for themselves and their possessions, *“walking on eggshells,”* and being in a state of hypervigilance: *“The other students and I were always on edge, wondering when the next episode was going to occur”* (Teacher).

3) Capacity to learn

Volatility and violence in the classroom not only undermine the emotional well-being of students but inhibit their ability to absorb and retain information. In fact, almost all respondents (93%) reported that workplace violence negatively impacts students’ learning environment. As one teacher eloquently wrote: *“No one functions effectively when they are in a constant state of fight or flight.”* The literature also supports this finding as, for example, Janosz et al. (2018) found that “witnessing school violence [...] was associated with lower academic achievement” and “decreased academic engagement” (p. 1119).

Negative impact of workplace violence on the learning environment



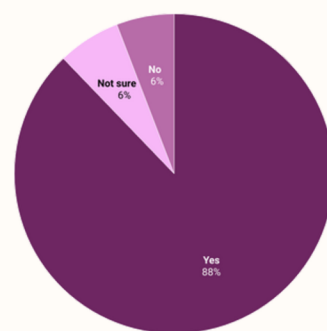
4.5

IMPACTS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ARE LAYERED

Research has established that pandemic measures significantly impacted the social development, academic competencies, and mental health of children and youth (OECD, 2023; Vaillancourt, 2021). Survey participants said much the same thing: 90% indicated that students' social skills and emotional difficulties had worsened after the pandemic; a similar pattern of results was observed for students' behavioural difficulties. The direct effect of these challenges on violence and harassment against education sector workers is difficult to quantify in the absence of pre-pandemic data; however, rates of violence and harassment against education sector workers have been worsening for decades (Santor et al., 2019) and the pandemic may have exacerbated the situation. Almost half of participants (46%) noted that the severity and frequency of violence towards education sector workers worsened post-pandemic (8% felt it improved, 20% said unchanged, and 26% were unsure).

While it is not clear the extent to which pandemic measures exacerbated violence and harassment against education sector workers, what is clear is that the decline in social, emotional, and behavioural skills has increased workplace demands. Almost nine in ten educators (88%) noted that time spent managing off-task behaviours, inappropriate behaviours, and students emotions has increased since the pandemic. One teacher wrote: *"With overwhelming class sizes and student needs, it is very difficult to support students; this causes behavioural issues and safety concerns. Teachers need to play the role of teacher, counsellor, babysitter, supervisor, cheerleader, planner, etc. The expectations have doubled, and student needs tripled."*

"Since the pandemic, I spend more time managing student behaviours and emotions."



These increased demands on educators must be understood in the context of *"funding decreases and lower support ratios"* (Educational Assistant). One teacher explained: *"We have had ZERO counselling services for our students since March 2020 when Covid hit. Our school division provided ZERO services in this department. It was just in the 2023-2024 school year that we got a social worker 0.5 days per week. She can't even begin to deal with our students' struggles."*

Pandemic-related impacts also play out in other ways. Tensions around pandemic measures (e.g., masking, vaccine mandates) may engender interpersonal conflicts and strain cohesion among staff. An Educational Assistant noted: *"One of the biggest conflicts amongst staff was based on whether they were vaccinated or not."* Moreover, according to some participants, it has also resulted in less civility: *"The entitlement that I have witnessed from students and families, and the lack of respect given to educators absolutely floors me; it's gotten worse since the pandemic"* (Clerical Worker).

“

Since Covid masking rules and the new 'parents bill', I have experienced a significant increase in my stress level at work. The interactions I've had with parents have become so negative it's off the charts. A simple call about attendance turns into a parent chewing you out for pushing an agenda. I have thought about quitting for years, and I may be at the point where I can't take it anymore.

– Teacher

”



Conclusion *Conclusion*

“

We are losing good people in the education sector. People who care, people who are good at what they do, because it is getting worse and not better.

– Educational Assistant

”

On a “*White-Knuckle Roller-Coaster Ride*”

“Many of these students have sad behind the mad.” – Library Worker

The findings in this report are, or certainly should be, shocking. It is deeply concerning that 84% of participants experienced at least one act, attempt, or threat of physical force in the 2022-2023 school year. Harassment, at 87%, was even more pervasive; indeed, three in four participants experienced student-initiated harassment and more than half reported harassment by a parent(s). Disturbingly, violence is increasingly ‘part of the job’. It is truly alarming that, for students and workers in Saskatchewan schools, witnessing violence against education sector workers is becoming routine.

As we have seen, workplace violence and harassment have significant impacts on the physical health, mental well-being, and professional engagement of Saskatchewan education sector workers; it also reverberates through their personal lives affecting their children, partners, and friends. Violence ripples through the lives of students who are fearful for themselves and their possessions, as well as destabilized by the responses (e.g., classroom evacuations). There are also impacts on the ‘disruptive’ students who may find themselves marginalized and ostracized from their peers. Finally, there are myriad social costs including the normalization of violence by students, the irrecoverable loss of educational opportunities, the careers abandoned by trained education sector workers, the strain on the healthcare system caused by physical and mental injuries at work, and the economic costs of replacing educators on leave.

It is not a rhetorical flourish to say that Saskatchewan schools are beyond the breaking point! They are also underfunded. Nationally, the average per-student spending increased by 24.9% between 2012-2013 and 2020-2021; in Saskatchewan, the increase was a mere 3.4% (Zwaagstra, Li & Palacios, 2023, p. 5). When adjusted for inflation, Saskatchewan’s per-student spending actually decreased by 11.6% over this period (*ibid.*, p. 9). In short, as needs have increased – not least due to the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic measures – resources have shrunk. The fallout is all too evident.

The title of the conclusion is taken from a quote by an Educational Assistant who wrote: “*The constant defunding of education has left our already struggling education system on a white-knuckle roller-coaster ride and our students are paying the price.*” In real terms, it speaks to the way underfunding ‘plays out’ in: larger class sizes, inadequate ratios of educational assistants, a lack of mental health supports, limited access to diagnostic services, high rates of absenteeism, and strained special educational resources. It means, amongst other things, that teachers are overburdened, educational assistants are scrambling to regulate behaviours, and students’ needs are not being met.

“

It is awful to see colleagues and students mistreated. We have a tight, supportive staff, but we are all struggling with our mental health – especially when we know that the money that is held back could support students. Our physical and mental wellbeing is being sacrificed to save money. Our kids are in situations of uncertainty and fear to save money. We have daily conversations about being put in harm’s way and feeling awful because we cannot meet students’ needs – no matter how much extra heart and soul, time, and effort we put in.

– Teacher

”

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