



Let's Make Our Schools Safe

Addressing Violence in Elementary Schools

Violent Incidents in Schools are Increasing

In 2023, ETFO commissioned a survey of its members to examine the rising concern of violence in schools. The results confirmed that violence in Ontario's elementary public schools is a systemic and pervasive issue. It impacts the physical and psychological health of educators, disrupts learning, and threatens the well-being of students – both those who are struggling and those who are witnesses to violent incidents.

ETFO members have identified violence in schools as a growing problem. Four out of five members report an increase in the number of incidents of violence in schools, and two-thirds say that violent incidents are becoming more severe. All students in Ontario's public schools need to be safe and receive the supports they need. The provincial government and school boards have a responsibility to provide the necessary funding to ensure that adequate front-line staffing and supports are in place to meet the needs of students.

Number of violent incidents
has increased

80%

Severity has increased

66%

Violence is a growing problem

80%

What Students Need

ETFO is committed to defending and improving Ontario's publicly funded education system, fighting for equity for all, and creating safe and supportive school environments. Addressing violence in schools is an essential part of ETFO's work, not only to keep ETFO members safe and healthy at work, but to ensure that the needs of all students are met. Educators understand that student behaviours that may present a risk of injury to others are symptoms of unmet needs and undeveloped skills. Students need understanding and support to help them thrive.

Students in Ontario's public elementary schools need:

- Timely access to assessments to identify exceptionalities and learning needs
- Intervention to support student needs as soon as they are identified, and an end to waitlists
- The opportunity to learn alongside same-aged peers in inclusive settings, supported by the appropriate staffing, training, resources, and mental health supports
- Timely access to programs that include educators and staff trained in meeting the particular needs of students when educators and families determine that those students' needs are best met in specialized settings
- Systems outside of school that are fully funded and easily accessed that meet the needs of children and families, including mental health supports
- A safe learning environment where they do not have to experience or witness violence or harassment

What can the Provincial Government Do?

Provide adequate funding that meets the diverse needs of students

Violent behaviour from a child is fundamentally the result of unmet needs. ETFO has long been calling for a review of the funding formula; in particular to ensure that there is adequate funding for students with special education needs. Regardless of any other special education needs they may or may not have, students who are struggling to regulate their behaviour, and for whom the typical interventions at the school level have not worked, need increased, personalized, and specialized support.

The government should allocate funding to school boards for the hiring of additional educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, child and youth workers, school support counsellors, and speech and language pathologists

Reduce class sizes to help support students

Educators identify small classes as the most important factor in their ability to work individually with students and meet their diverse needs. Smaller classes improve student behaviour and peer relationships while increasing student engagement and achievement in the elementary grades. Investing in smaller classes contributes to alleviating aggressive behaviour that causes incidents of classroom violence.

Currently, grades 4 to 8 do not have a cap on class size. This has resulted in the

largest class sizes in the system, often more than 30 students in a class. The benefits of smaller classes that we have seen in the Primary grades need to be extended to grades 4 to 8.

Class size is also an issue in Ontario's Full-Day Kindergarten program. There are still many classes with over 30 students and an even greater number of Kindergarten/ Grade 1 split-grade classes, which are not supported by a designated early childhood educator. Overcrowded, noisy classrooms create stressful work and learning environments, and limit the ability of educators to provide individualized support to students who need it.

The government should cap grades 4 to 8 class size at 24 students, and Kindergarten at 26 students

A renewed commitment to gather and share data about violence in schools

To address violence in schools, it is important that the data gathered be accurate and that school boards be transparent with other stakeholders so that a collaborative approach can be used. All workers must be encouraged to report all incidents of violence and all school boards must ensure that the reporting system be easy to use and gather comprehensive information. The data must be shared with joint health and safety committees and school board trustees at the local level and gathered by the Ministry of Education to be shared and analyzed by stakeholders at the provincial level.

Ensure compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)

The OHSA already has protections for workers to keep them safe from violence and harassment. A Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training, and Skills Development's health and safety compliance initiative on workplace violence in schools carried out in 2023 revealed that basic requirements of the OHSA are not in place. For example, the order most frequently issued was for violence risk assessments, which in some cases had not been updated in years, and in other cases, administrators were completely unfamiliar with the requirement to carry out such assessments.

What can School Board Trustees Do?

Ask for the data

School board trustees have a duty to the community that elected them and must exercise due diligence in ensuring that school boards comply with legislation to protect both staff and students. School boards are already responsible for gathering information on workplace violence and creating aggregated and customizable reports. Trustees must insist that those reports are shared with them regularly, that mitigation efforts are outlined, and that the effectiveness of those efforts is evaluated.

Listen to affected families and their advocates

Almost four in five ETFO members reported experiencing or witnessing violence in schools during the 2022-2023 school year.

This means that a significant number of students in elementary schools have witnessed or experienced this violence. Behind most reports of violent incidents in schools are struggling students and their families. The voices of those students and families are often found in advocacy groups, at special education advisory committees, and in school councils. Trustees have many opportunities to understand more about the issue of violence, and the needs of those most affected, by engaging with those families and advocacy groups.

Call for systemic, province-wide solutions

The issue of violence in schools is pervasive and widespread, but it is not unsolvable. Addressing violence in schools requires the government to implement a province-wide strategy that provides adequate funding and supports, and engages school boards, educators, students, and their families.

School board trustees can use their voice to call on the provincial government to implement a province-wide strategy to address violence in schools and provide much-needed funding for front-line staffing and supports.



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