

More support needed to make workplace safer: teachers' union

Violence against elementary school staff a growing problem, provincial study finds

JENN WATT
Editor

The workplace has become increasingly dangerous for elementary school education workers, a recent University of Ottawa study has found, with violence against teachers, EAs and other staff affecting more than half of those surveyed.

The study, called "Facing the Facts: The escalating crisis of violence against elementary school educators in Ontario," was released in September and found that "54 per cent of educators reported experiencing one or more acts of physical violence during the 2017-2018 school year; 60 per cent reported one or more attempts to use physical force and 49 per cent experienced one or more threats. Overwhelmingly, this violence was student perpetrated."

The union representing elementary school teachers across the province said the results of the study, which involved 1,688 educators surveyed in December of 2018, is evidence of the need for more supports and resources for students and point to violence in the workplace as a reason for higher rates of sick leave and WSIB claims. The study found a seven-fold increase in violence over the last 12 years.

Locally, Trillium Lakelands District School Board tracks numbers of staff injured on the job.

"In the 2018-2019 [school year] we had 982 reports of staff injury from student

aggression/violent incidents," Catherine Shedden, spokesperson for TLDSB, wrote in an email to the *Echo*. "This includes when special education staff are intervening with students with special needs. And it also includes students who attempted but did not injure staff."

One former educational assistant who worked for TLDSB up until recently said that she frequently experienced aggressive behaviour from students, leading to physical and mental health issues. She said she went into the field because she wanted to help students with disabilities, but found that being an EA was 80 per cent dealing with students with behavioural issues and, crucially, that she didn't think there was enough staff to properly handle situations that arose.

"It is non-stop, all day, jumping from one thing to another and just because kids have these learning plans and things in place, if something comes up that trumps that – which [poor] behaviour trumps everything because it means safety's at risk – you're putting out fires all day: fire, fire, fire," said the EA, who asked to remain nameless because of the sensitive nature of the issue. "You're not actually working on a behaviour or working to get this child what they need because there's not enough staff."

She said she's had things thrown at her and has been subjected to physical aggression.

"I know people that have had it far worse than me, that would have to wear protective body armour so they don't get bit or punched or their hair ripped out, people who have to wear hats all day

“

These children, who are coming into the system, they need proper diagnosis at an early stage and they need proper interventions.

— Karen Bratina
President of Trillium Lakelands
teacher local, ETFO

because they've had pieces of their scalp torn out. It is getting more and more hazardous and more and more people are leaving, going on stress leave, sick leave, and I don't know how they do what they do and I'll always support them. It's one of the hardest, most unappreciated jobs ever."

Her experience in the workplace sometimes led to intense anxiety, said the EA.

"I had to go into therapy because I was having such anxiety and panic and it was getting so bad I didn't want to go to the school anymore. I would have to pull over on the way driving to work to talk myself into going to work."

She no longer works as an educational assistant.

Karen Bratina, president of the Trillium Lakelands teacher local of Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, said more resources are needed to support education workers, in particular more EAs as well as psychologists and psychiatrists to diagnose conditions early on, so that appropriate accommodations can be

made.

"When I talk about the Ministry [of Education] providing the proper funding, I'm talking about providing front-line supports for the students that are most vulnerable, those who are most violent. Because in the end, these violent behaviours are their form of communication," Bratina said. "These children, who are coming into the system, they need proper diagnosis at an early stage and they need proper interventions."

An ETFO survey done a couple of years ago had similar findings to the one from the University of Ottawa, she said, with 70 per cent of teachers experiencing violence within their school community – either on them or witnessing violence against others.

"We have a few teachers in this board that have had to wear protective gear – nowhere near what some of the boards are wearing – but we have some that wear what they call bite gloves or bite sleeves because children are biting them," she said.

Bratina said she worried about the change in workplace environment; that teachers and other workers are becoming accustomed to dealing with aggressive behaviour.

"One of the biggest concerns I get from my teachers [that I represent] is that these behaviours are becoming normalized in their environment," she said. "... I have teachers evacuating the entire class because you no longer remove a violent student from the classroom, you remove everybody else so that the violent student can de-escalate and somebody comes in and helps that student de-escalate and so, again, it's negatively impacting on the learning of those other students. I know that ETFO has plans to really take the lead

see SCHOOL page 5

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School board seeing 'change in the intensity of need for some of our learners'

from page 4

on this this year, especially since we're bargaining."

ETFO staff plan to begin work-to-rule job action next week as negotiations with the province continue. CUPE, which represents a range of education workers including EAs, voted earlier this month to ratify their agreement with the provincial government.

A teacher who works for TLDSB told the *Echo* that she found it fulfilling to work with students with behavioural issues, but being able to make progress requires having supports necessary in the classroom. Sometimes students act out as a way of communicating, she said, and by working with them, over time she can see change.

"You see so much progress," she said. "When you figure that trigger out and then you do things to get around it, and then it no longer happens [you think] 'yeah! I won!' And then you also see this student starts to feel good too," she said. "To see those kids who came to me ... that would scream, yell, throw and now they're putting their hands up and participating in class. You do all that work behind the scenes ... to try to minimize the anger. There's definitely many students that need more support, definitely."

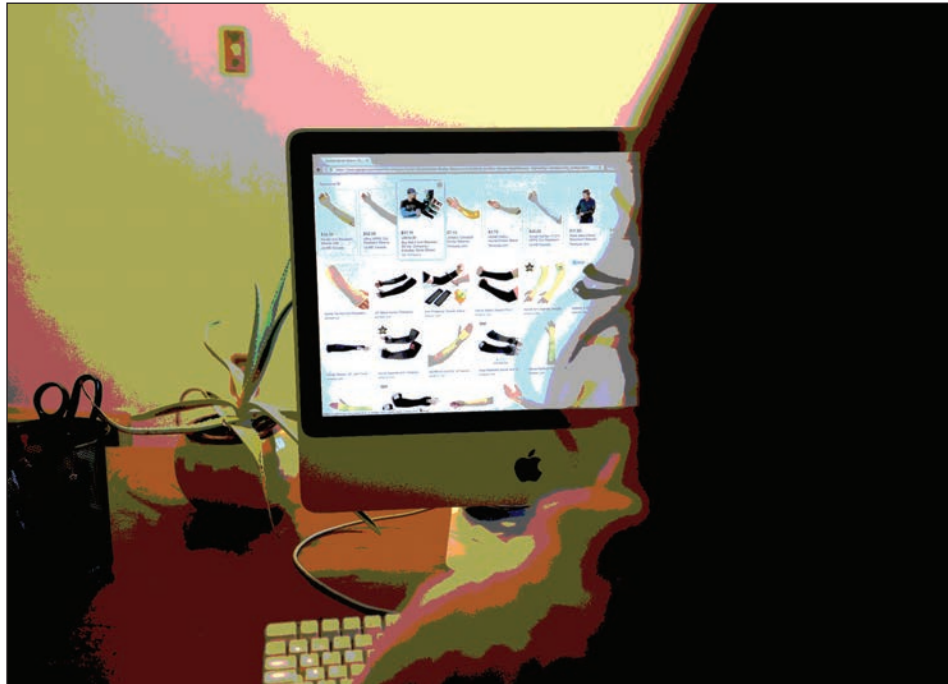
The teacher, who is employed by the school board and asked not to be named, said that although TLDSB has provided her with training and tools to address aggressive student behaviour, not all teachers have as much support in the classroom as is needed.

"If I have 25 kids in the classroom and no support, each kid gets 1-25th of my time. But if I have another adult in the classroom, that other adult can see, hey, [a student is] getting pretty angry. That EA can dedicate more time with that student while I work with the 24," she said.

"There's so many students that are on that cusp of either figuring out they're a learner or turning to the behaviour and it seems like there's more students turning to behaviour because they don't understand something, they don't get something, than there are kids turning to learners."

Both the EA and the teacher said that experience varies based on assignment. Depending on the students they're looking after, they may rarely experience an aggressive episode.

The teacher said that in her experience, EAs handle more of the behavioural issues.



Some educators across the province, including a few working at Trillium Lakelands District School Board, wear "bite sleeves" – protective coverings to avoid injury while working with children, according to the ETFO local president. A survey of more than 1,600 educators across the province found that more than half had been subjected to violence in the previous year, mostly from students. The teachers' union says more educational assistants and mental health specialists are needed in the classrooms to properly support children. /KAREN LONDON Staff

"They don't get enough credit. They truly, honestly don't. At the end of every single day, I say to my EA, 'thank you.' I couldn't get through a day without her. So, I always thank my EA. We're a team."

TLDSB spokesperson Catherine Shedden said 11 trainers provide behaviour management systems training to EAs, who are recertified every year. The training is also available for teachers and administrators.

"It is also important to note that we have a behaviour intervention resource team available to support school teams with programming for students with behavioural exceptionalities," she said.

Regarding how EAs are allocated to classrooms, she said the board reviews how many EAs each school has twice a year. The principal "works with central staff to determine the needs of all students when assigning staff." Special funding is available from the Ministry of Education for "staff support to ensure the health and/or safety of students who have extraordinarily high needs."

Asked whether the board needed more funding for EAs and mental health specialists to address issues that lead to student aggression toward staff, Shedden

said TLDSB had been working with an increasingly demanding situation regarding student behaviour.

"We have seen a change in the intensity

of need for some of our learners and this is becoming increasingly difficult to manage," she said via email. "School boards are now expected to support children in their mental health and well-being in a way that was not expected in the past. We work hard to be as responsive as possible with the educational assistants and student services counsellors we have in place. We can always use more staff as the intensity and frequency of needs increase."

Shedden said any workers who witness incidents of concern are to report to the principal using a "safe schools reporting form" and the principal is responsible for responding.

According to the University of Ottawa study, respondents from across Ontario reported "taking an average of 6.84 days off work following their worst instance of harassment in the past year and an average of 5.18 days off work following their worst instance of physical violence."

"Almost half of educators did not report their worst incident of workplace violence in the past year," the report states, with reasons given such as "lack of time, being discouraged to do so and concern about repercussions."

Bratina said more support needs to come from the province to make classrooms safer.

Supporters need to "put pressure on this government," she said. "... I think that's the best way to get the message across."



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