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Sabrina Byrnes/Metroland

Sondra Tafertshofer and Jana Marnoch are concerned parents who say their children have experienced repeated physical violence in their classrooms, as well as witnessing violence against their teacher and regularly having to evacuate their classroom for 'learning walks' because a classmate is behaving in a way that is unsafe. The moms say their children are suffering significant emotional and psychological distress. One of their children is in therapy as a result, another is only going to school three days a week.

## 'IT'S SCARY TO SEE THIS HAPPENING TO YOUR CHILD'

JILLIAN FOLLERT  
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DURHAM - School boards across Ontario have been grappling with how to support teachers who experience violence in the classroom - but some Durham parents say more also needs to be done to support students impacted by violence.

Jana Marnoch and Sondra Tafertshofer - whose daughters are

in kindergarten at a Durham District School Board school - say their children have experienced "physical, mental and emotional" harm since the beginning of this school year.

Metroland Durham Region Media Group has opted not to name the school, to protect the privacy of the children involved.

Tafertshofer says her four-year-old has been hit, kicked, punched, bitten, pushed,

scratched and pulled to the ground by her hair - and that she and her classmates are routinely "evacuated" from their classroom for their safety.

She describes the classroom as "volatile" and says her daughter now acts out scenarios from school when she is playing at home, has regressed in toilet training, experiences panic attacks and frequently complains of headaches and stomach aches.

"It has consumed her," Tafertshofer says in a letter to school board officials.

She has now started keeping her daughter home from school two days a week -- sometimes more.

Marnoch describes her five-year-old's experience as a "hellish nightmare."

She says her daughter has had

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# PARENTS OF YOUNG DURHAM STUDENTS SAY CLASSES ROUTINELY 'EVACUATED' DUE TO VIOLENCE

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furniture thrown at her, is disturbed by seeing her teachers hurt and now complains daily of headaches and stomach aches because of the "violent, toxic, disruptive" environment in her classroom.

Marnoch says her daughter's behaviour at home has changed radically this school year and now includes bouts of rage and physical aggression - behaviour she believes is directly related to what is witnessed at school.

Her daughter is now in therapy.

"It's scary to see this happening to your child," says Marnoch, who becomes emotional as she describes her family's experience.

Another Durham parent - whose name is being withheld because she works for the DDSB and is not allowed to speak to the media - says her son, who is in kindergarten, is "extremely stressed" about going to school after repeatedly being bitten and punched.

"This is something teachers can't talk about with parents because of privacy issues, and it's something the school board, quite frankly, doesn't want to acknowledge," she says. "Of course we want to protect the privacy of students with special needs. But at the same time, how can we ignore what is happening to the other kids in the class?"

Data from the DDSB shows employees filed 3,570 violence incident reports between September 2017 and May 2018 - officials note that more than one employee may file a report on the same incident.

A breakdown of the data shows 83 per cent of incident reports involve employees being hit, pushed or kicked; 26 per cent involved scratching, grabbing or pinching; 21 per cent involved biting; 16 per

cent involved verbal threats, yelling and profanity; and 15 per cent fell into the "other" category, which includes hair-pulling, spitting and objects being thrown.

Fifty-nine per cent of reports were related to students in kindergarten to Grade 3.

Updated DDSB violent incident data for this school year is expected in June.

Classroom violence is an issue David Mastin is familiar with.

As president of the Durham local of the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, he has been vocal about worsening violence against teachers.

Mastin says a conversation about how the situation impacts students, is the next logical step.

"We've all hypothesized about whether or not the violence happening against our members is being processed by these kids in a way that could potentially be harmful," he says.

Mastin says it's a difficult conversation - but one that needs to be had in order to find solutions.

He says it's crucial to ensure students with special needs or behaviour challenges aren't blamed or marginalized, stressing that they are being failed as well.

"They are a group of people that we need to be wrapping our arms around and protecting. Teachers on the receiving end of violence understand that these kids are victims of a system that has not provided the support they need."

Mastin says ETFO has consistently advocated for more classroom supports including educational assistants, psychologists and child and youth workers.

"Our members are not able to support (students with special needs) the way they need - our teachers are teachers, they don't have that professional capacity,"

**THE ISSUE:**  
PARENTS SAY MORE SUPPORTS ARE NEEDED IN SCHOOLS FOR STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE CLASSROOM VIOLENCE

**LOCAL IMPACT:**  
TEACHER UNIONS SAY THERE AREN'T ENOUGH SCHOOL SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

he says.

Similar concerns are echoed by local members of the Ontario English Catholic Teacher Association.

According to OECTA Durham Elementary, 150 violent incidents were reported by Durham Catholic District School Board elementary teachers between March 1, 2018 and Jan. 30, 2019.

However, union officials believe that number isn't reflective of what's really happening in schools, saying teachers are often pressured not to report, or are unsure about whether the incident they experienced should be reported.

"Inclusion and inclusive classrooms work -- but only when there is support, resources and services available to teachers and the other staff and students in the schools," says Melissa Cowen, president of OECTA Durham Elementary.

She says resources such as psychologists and child and youth workers need to be available to all teachers and all students -- those with special needs as well as their classmates.

"Violence in schools and classrooms is closely tied to mental health and well-being and the incidents affect everyone," Cowen says. "In-

creased emphasis and support in this area must become a priority in order to protect teachers and students."

Metroland Durham Region Media Group contacted all 11 Durham public school board trustees about the experiences of the parents in this story -- none provided a comment.

The school board offered a lengthy written statement in response to questions about how violence in the classroom impacts students.

The DDSB says when students are struggling "academically, socially, emotionally or behaviourally" it can lead to "incidents of aggression," and that school staff including special education resource teachers, social workers, psychologists, guidance counsellors and administrators, work together to support students.

Specialized teams - such as an autism resource team - are also available to schools.

"Efforts are made to look at all of the factors contributing to a student's struggles which can evolve to incidents of aggression or violence," the statement notes. "In the case of behavioural challenges, both neuro-developmental and mental health factors are considered. These considerations help the school team to create a behaviour safety plan that allows educational staff to program appropriately for the student. If the child doesn't have special needs then a safe schools student safety plan may be used."

Asked how the school board supports students who have witnessed or experienced classroom violence, the DDSB says parents are encouraged to talk to their child's principal or vice-principal about any concerns.

"Efforts are continually made to communicate and reassure students around

their safety at school," the statement says, adding that teachers are supposed by the board's psychological services, social workers and safe schools team.

Tafertshofer and Marnoch say they don't feel supported and question why there hasn't been better communication from the school about what their daughters have experienced.

Often, they learn about incidents from their children.

The moms say they have had numerous conversations with their school principal and have also reached out to the school board - solutions suggested to them have included having their children leave class to sit in the office for "stress relief."

"That's not a solution," Tafertshofer says. "How is my child leaving class and not learning, a solution? The solution would be to make it so her class isn't so stressful that she has to leave."

The question of how much parents should know about what goes on in their child's classroom is a controversial one.

In December 2017, DDSB Trustee Paul Crawford moved a motion calling for parents to be notified of any violent incident at school that affects their child, or occurs in their child's classroom.

Crawford was not looking for students involved to be named, and stressed this is information parents deserve to have.

The DDSB's special education advisory committee objected to the motion "in the strongest possible

terms," and said it put student privacy at risk.

"It is not hard to envision that this type of notification could lead to children being ostracized in the schoolyard, as parent's concerned for their children's safety, encourage their children to stay away from students who may be struggling with self regulation," a letter from the committee noted.

DDSB chair Michael Barrett echoed those concerns, saying the motion could lead to "witch hunts" of special needs students.

Trustees voted down the motion in February 2018.

However, a special ad hoc committee was created to look into violent incidents in DDSB schools.

A recent report outlines some of the actions that have been taken to address violence, including a pilot "intensive support class" at Grove School for students with complex needs, and a pilot model that sees more educational assistants in schools at the beginning of the school year - a time when the data shows there are more violent incidents.

*Editors note: Teachers say violent incidents are often connected to students with special needs -- but not always. In some cases, students arrive in kindergarten without the needed self-regulation skills to handle a full day of learning in a busy classroom, and may act out physically as a result. This trend is reflected in "Early Development Instrument" data collected by school boards, which measures whether kindergarten children meet age-appropriate development expectations*

## STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Education reporter Jillian Follert has been writing about violence in the classroom for several years, including stories from the perspectives of teachers and their unions, a controversial motion that called for parents to be notified of these incidents, the DDSB's first large release of data on the subject in June 2018, and the concerns of parents whose children have autism. Jillian frequently hears from parents, teachers and trustees on this issue.