

# *Running on Fumes*

Violence, Austerity, and Institutional  
Neglect in Ontario Schools

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# Introduction

“We are running on fumes. We need support systems in place. We need more human and physical resources to help students. We need more disability support. We need better programs for students who are not yet ready for integrated classrooms so that we can fade them in gradually as they demonstrate a capacity to function without damage to their mental health. Our system is causing these students harm. This is a symptom.”

– Classroom Teacher, Grade 2

The ubiquity and normalization of workplace violence and harassment are certainly not news to those who labour in Ontario’s publicly funded schools – it is the reality they routinely navigate. Moreover, it has been established in the literature that education sector workers in Ontario experience unacceptably high levels of workplace violence and harassment, that rates and frequencies are increasing, and that there is widespread normalization and trivialization (e.g., Bruckert et al., 2021, Chen et al., 2019; Cousineau et al., 2024; Lanthier et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2012; OSSTF, 2025; Santor et al., 2021, 2025; Stratcom, 2023). As such, this report endeavours to go beyond shocking statistics (although plenty will be found on these pages) to answer the why and how questions – considering, for example, the meaning of ‘violence’, the significance of workers’ intersecting identities, the impacts that ripple through the lives of education sector workers and students, and the price we all pay. We also examine the root causes of workplace violence through a structural lens. Indeed, the title of the report, *Running on Fumes*, taken from the longer quote above, speaks to a recurring theme: decades of austerity-driven funding cuts have culminated in an education system at the breaking point, characterized by inadequate physical and human resources and insufficient student supports. This failure of the state to provide care is institutional neglect (see textbox); the lack of care engenders conditions in which students are struggling, frustrated, and falling behind. Workplace violence is a serious problem; it is also, as the teacher above notes, a symptom of this failure.

## **Institutional neglect is...**

*“when state services deny care to eligible citizens” and “institutions fail to provide for care needs which they have historically recognised as valid” (Kiely & Warnock, 2023, p. 316-7).*

## **Outline of the report**

This report is divided into six substantive sections – each consisting of stand-alone analytical pages:

1. **Violence:** first considers the language of violence, then presents rates and frequencies of student-initiated violence, rising incident rates, and the hypervulnerability of educational assistants.
2. **Harassment:** focuses on student-initiated harassment, the surprisingly high rates and frequencies of parent-initiated harassment against teachers and clerical staff, and the ways elevated levels of harassment create a toxic work environment.
3. **Reporting and Responses:** documents barriers to formal reporting, the nature of administrative responses, and the institutional supports available.
4. **Differences and Diversity:** examines the unique experiences of education sector workers who identify as women, racially minoritized, having a diagnosed mental illness, and 2SLGBTQIA+. The final page of this section considers the complexity of intersecting identities.
5. **Ripples and Repercussions:** presents findings on how workplace violence and harassment affect workers’ personal and professional lives, and its wide-ranging impacts on student learning and emotional wellbeing.
6. **Compounding Costs in the Age of Austerity:** maps some of the ways the removal or reduction of services and the restructuring of resources have compounded, creating the conditions of possibility for escalating levels of violence and harassment in schools.

## Methodological approach

Between October 16 and December 30, 2023, 5,797 Ontario education sector workers completed the *National Violence and Harassment Against Education Sector Workers Survey*. Participants were asked about their experiences of, the responses to, and impacts of workplace violence (i.e., acts, attempts, and threats of physical force) and harassment (e.g., slurs, insults, and put-downs) during the 2022-2023 school year. The research employed a mixed-methods approach. Envisioning quantitative and qualitative methods as complementary and mutually supportive, we adopted a dialectical approach that helped us ‘fill in’ the respective restrictions of each method (Hesse-Biber, 2016). While the quantitative data shed light on scope and correlations, the qualitative responses provided insight into the meanings of those numbers and how they ‘play out’ experientially. More specifically, SAS/STAT software, Version 9.4 was used to generate a variety of descriptive and inferential statistics on both the sample as a whole and subpopulations. Qualitative analysis, which was undertaken separately for each of the three occupational groupings, entailed grounded, conceptual, and thematic coding (using NVivo software, Version 14) of all open-ended questions. Coded data was subsequently subjected to horizontal and vertical analysis. In the interests of confidentiality, all quotations are presented in italics but without identifiers save for the grade taught (for teachers) or school grade levels (for direct and indirect student support workers). Quantitative data has been rounded to the nearest whole number thus graphs do not always total 100%.

## Content warning

Descriptions of workplace violence in this report may be disturbing and triggering for some readers.

## The research team

In 2018, Drs. Chris Bruckert and Darcy Santor (University of Ottawa) launched the *Violence and Harassment Against Educators Project*. Dr. Chris Bruckert, a professor of Criminology, has been researching, teaching, and mobilizing against gendered violence for over twenty-five years. Dr. Darcy Santor, a practicing clinical psychologist and professor of Psychology, is interested in mental health in young people and school-based mental health services. Hanya Ismail is a second-year doctoral student in Clinical Psychology (University of Ottawa); her research examines the responsibility of school administrators, the limits of their authority, and their decision-making process. Finally, the report’s lead author, Darby Mallory, is a third-year doctoral student in Criminology (University of Ottawa); Darby is particularly interested in the experiences of educational assistants in a racialized, gendered, and classed workplace. More information can be found at: [www.educatorviolence.ca](http://www.educatorviolence.ca).

## Acknowledgements

We thank the participants who took time out of their busy schedules to answer questions about their experiences and for their willingness to provide open and frank descriptions.

We would like to acknowledge the Ontario unions and federations who shared the survey with their members: AEFO (Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens), COPE (Canadian Office and Professional Employees Union) Local 527, OSBCU/CSCSO (CUPE Education Workers, Ontario), ETFO (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario), OECTA (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association), and OSSTF (Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation).

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC #435-2022-0054).

## Recommended citation

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# Survey Demographics

**Gender:** Education is a woman-dominated occupation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that 85% of participants identified as women, 13% as men, and 2% as other (e.g., Two-Spirited, non-binary, gender-fluid).

**Race:** The sample was overwhelmingly white (89%); just 11% of survey respondents identified as racially minoritized. Specifically, slightly more than 3% of the sample identified as Indigenous, 2% as Black, 2% as South Asian, and 1% identified as each of the following: East Asian, South East Asian, Middle Eastern, and Latino/Latina.

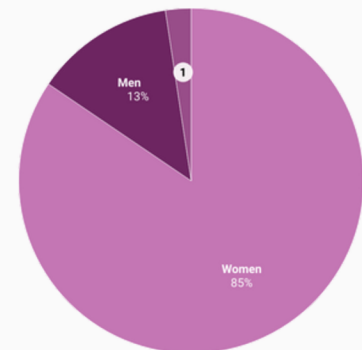
**Disability:** While most of the sample did not identify as having a disability, 19% identified as having a diagnosed mental illness, 7% a neurodevelopmental disorder, and 5% a physical disability. In addition, 3% of our sample indicated they had a learning disability. The proportion of respondents with a disability is representative of the broader population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023). Among those who self-identified as having a disability, the majority (66%) indicated their disability was somewhat impairing but that they were still able to do their job. 12% indicated their disability was very impairing, 3% that they were off work due to their disability, and the remaining 19% indicated that it was not at all impairing.

**2SLGBTQIA+:** Individuals from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were underrepresented in the sample relative to the general population – just 5% of participants identified as 2SLGBTQIA+.

**Religion:** More than half of respondents (55%) identified Christianity as their religious affiliation. 5% identified as agnostic and 6% as atheist. Another 12% were unaffiliated. A small percentage of participants (<1%) identified as affiliated with other religions or spiritualities (e.g., Judaism, Indigenous Spiritualities).

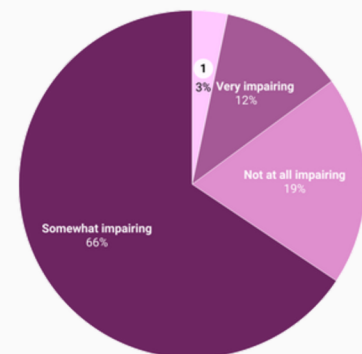
**Age & Experience:** The sample was predominantly comprised of seasoned workers: on average, participants had nearly 15 years of experience working in the education sector. In terms of age, 36% were over 50, and 34% were between the ages of 41 and 50. In addition, 23% were between the ages of 31 and 40, and 7% were under 30.

Gender



1 Gender-fluid, Two-Spirited, Non-binary, or other (2%)

Level of impairment (disability)



1 Debilitating

Average years of experience:

14.7

“

*Working in public education is important to me and I think it is for most of us. It is more than a job; we are helping to support the development of the next generation. Feeling that we are valued for that work makes a big difference.*

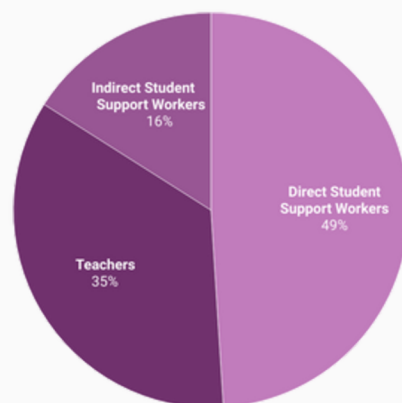
– Psychologist, K-12

# Professional Demographics

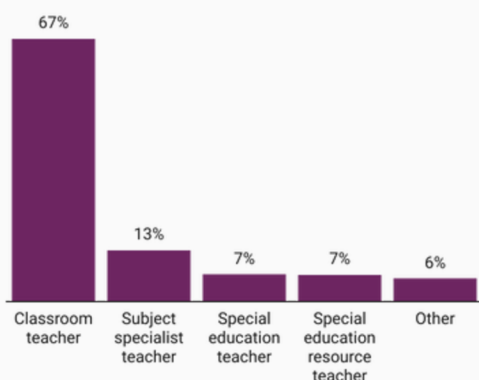
## Occupational Groupings

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

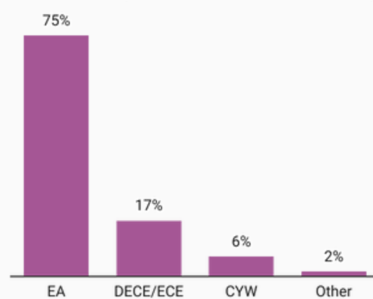
1. Teachers (e.g., Classroom Teacher, Special Education Teacher, Long-Term Occasional Teacher [LTO])
2. Direct Student Support Workers other than teachers (e.g., Early Childhood Educator [ECE], Educational Assistant [EA], Child and Youth Worker [CYW])
3. Indirect Student Support Workers (e.g., Custodial Worker, Clerical Worker, Bus Driver)



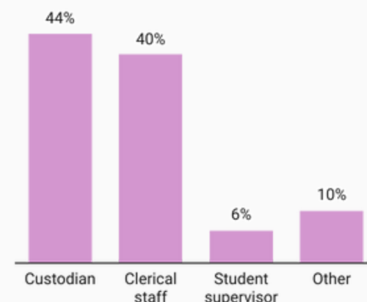
### 1. Teachers



### 2. Direct Student Support Workers (other than teachers)



### 3. Indirect Student Support Workers



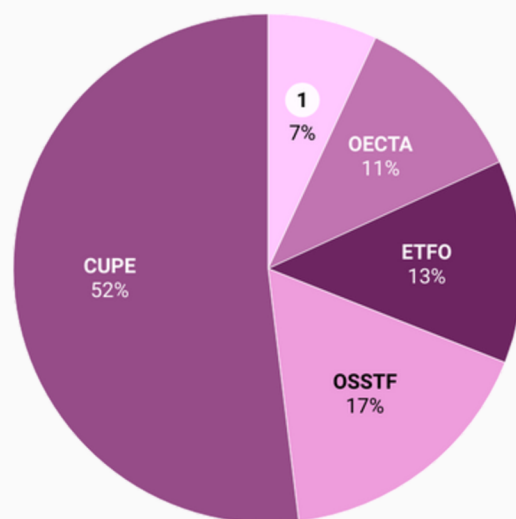
## Labour Characteristics

The vast majority of participants were employed full-time (85%) and most were permanent workers (89%).

Over half of respondents (62%) worked in the elementary panel (i.e., junior kindergarten up to grade 8), while 38% worked in the secondary panel (i.e., grades nine through twelve). Proportionally, our sample approximates that of the province: 66% of Ontario's education sector workers are employed in elementary schools (Government of Ontario, 2024).

The overwhelming majority (82%) of survey respondents worked in a single school, while 18% worked in two or more schools (i.e., as supply staff or occasional workers).

## Union or Federation Affiliation



1 AEFO (2%); COPE 527 (2%); Unaffiliated (3%)

# *Section 1:* *Violence*

“

*Education in Ontario is rapidly deteriorating. The public has NO IDEA what schools are really like. This isn't a Board or area-specific problem. All schools in Ontario are experiencing a rapid and unprecedented rise in violence in classrooms. Parents have no idea what their children are being subjected to every day because the media never talks about it and teachers are not permitted to talk about it to parents. Teachers of twenty years have never seen it like this before. Policies NEED to change!*

– Subject Specialist, Grade 6-7

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# 1.1

## ON LANGUAGE: CAN WE EVEN CALL IT ‘VIOLENCE’?

The language of ‘violence’ is loaded; its usage normatively evokes images of masked intruders, violent abusers, and armed robbers. In other words, we generally think of violence as acts of physical aggression intended to cause harm and to which the response is criminal justice intervention. This commonsense framing leaves many forms of violence outside the conversation, including: structural violence, institutional neglect, psychological harm, and emotional abuse. This framing also makes it difficult to reconcile the lashing out of a dysregulated child or struggling teen with the language of violence. Indeed, some education sector workers express ambivalence: *“These kids do not want to hurt teachers or really anyone. They don’t know how to communicate their needs; behaviour is a form of communication”* (LTO Teacher, Grade 8).

As such, we have no desire to demonize children and youth who ‘have run out of words’, nor do we wish to suggest these students are perpetrators in the conventional sense of the word. Indeed, in the final section of this report, we argue that the children and youth who act out aggressively may well be victims of institutional neglect by the systems and structures that deny them the resources and supports they need to thrive:

*Individual schools (at least mine) are bending over backwards to support the students that require support. The number of needs however are more and more, and there is not enough staff to support those needs. [...] Our students are faced with numerous life changing challenges daily and then are expected to be ready to learn. Our students need far more than the government and our boards are willing to provide. Staff are attempting to make up for these gaps and provide the support these amazing students need.*

– Educational Assistant, K-6

At the same time, we categorically reject euphemistic reframing (e.g., *“blowing off steam”*), minimization based on the ubiquity of violence (e.g., *“that’s part of the job”*), or denial of the impacts or injuries because of the child’s age (e.g., *“they are just in kindergarten”*). To do so negates the physical, mental, and psychological injuries caused by workplace violence (regardless of whether harm was intended). In this report, we align ourselves with the definition of workplace violence in Ontario’s *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, and the Ministry of Labour’s (2023) recognition that, “a person does not need to have the capacity to understand that their behaviour could cause physical injury to a worker [for it] to constitute workplace violence.” In short, notwithstanding tensions around the language of violence, education sector workers do *“have the right to be safe at work”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 9-12).

*“Violence from the perspective of the broader community is viewed as minimal because it is ‘children’, ‘part of the job’, or ‘not a big deal’. My safety concerns are simply dismissed because I am financially compensated and have a few weeks off at a desirable time of the year.”*

– Classroom Teacher,  
Grade 6

*“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”* (OSSTF, Safe at Schools Report, 2025, p. 41).

## 1.2

# THE PERVASIVENESS OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

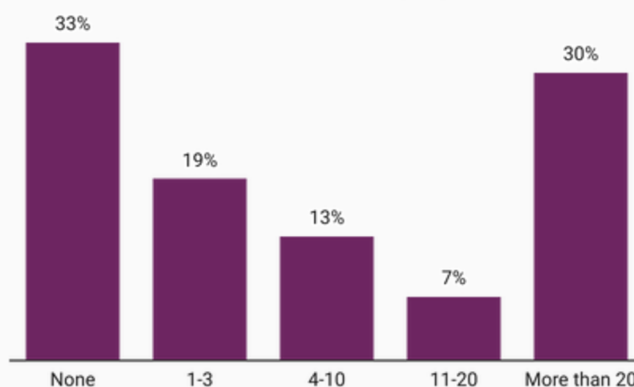
Four out of every five participants (80%) experienced one or more acts, attempts, or threats of physical force from any of the four sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, administrators); on average, they experienced 22.5 unique instances during the 2022-2023 school year.

## Student-initiated violence

Most workplace violence is student-initiated:

- 67% of respondents experienced at least one student-initiated act of physical force; 30% reported more than 20 unique acts.
- Over 70% of respondents (71%) experienced at least one student-initiated attempt of physical force; one third of respondents reported more than 20 unique attempts.
- 63% of participants reported a threat of physical force from a student; almost one in four (23%) reported more than 20 threats.

Student-initiated acts of physical force



## Parent-initiated violence

One in six participants (16%) experienced one or more acts, attempts, or threats of physical force from a parent. When broken down, threats of physical force were the most commonly reported type of parent-initiated violence: 13% experienced at least one parent-initiated threat to use physical force.

“

*A parent threaten to run me over with their car because I had asked them to move when they were blocking bus traffic. Then they hit another car and said it was my fault because I had asked them to move. They continued to threaten to run me over.*

– Child and Youth Worker, K-8

”

## Witnessing violence

The pervasiveness of workplace violence means that most participants (84%) witnessed their colleagues being subjected to student-initiated physical force. Witnessing workplace violence has profound impacts on the emotional and psychological health, sense of safety and security, and job satisfaction of workers. It can also engender a sense of powerlessness: “EAs are frequently threatened physically and verbally. I’ve seen various assaults on EAs from students, including kicking, hitting, punching, and spitting. I feel useless because I cannot intervene. All I can do is call for more back-up” (Clerical Worker, K-6).

**84%**

**of participants  
witnessed student-  
initiated violence  
against a colleague**



# 1.3

## IS STUDENT-INITIATED VIOLENCE GETTING WORSE?... ABSOLUTELY!

Education sector workers across all three occupational groupings (i.e., teachers, direct student support workers, indirect student support workers) indicated that workplace violence in Ontario schools is increasing in both frequency and intensity. A clerical worker (K-6) told us: “I’ve always felt safe working in schools until the last 2 to 3 years. Student behaviours are getting worse and I feel more fearful.” An elementary school teacher wrote: “In the first 15 years of my career, I rarely saw or witnessed any violence or harassment. In the second half of my career, it has just become something I now expect.”

*“It seems there has been a big increase in violence in our schools. What used to be a weekly occurrence is now several times a day. It has become normalized!”*

– Educational Assistant, K-4

### Longitudinal comparison of rates and frequencies

We are uniquely positioned to assess if student-initiated violence against education sector workers in Ontario is, as many participants asserted, increasing. To do so, we compare the rates and frequencies of student-initiated violence from this study to the results of previous research (which asked identical questions) conducted by the *Violence & Harassment Against Educators Project*.

#### Elementary school educators

In fall 2018, elementary school teachers from ETFO were surveyed about their experiences of workplace violence during the 2017-2018 school year. Comparing those findings to elementary school teachers in our 2022-2023 survey reveals that rates have increased by more than 30% (from 62% to 95%) and mean frequency more than doubled (from 8.8 unique incidents in the school year, to 18.4).

##### Rates: Student-initiated violence against elementary school teachers, Ontario



##### Mean frequency: Student-initiated violence against elementary school teachers, Ontario



#### Direct student support workers

In 2020, direct student support workers (e.g., Educational Assistants, Early Childhood Educators) from CUPE Ontario were surveyed about their experiences of workplace violence during the 2018-2019 school year. Comparing those findings to direct student support workers in our 2022-2023 survey reveals that rates of student-initiated violence have increased from high to even higher: 93% to 98%. The mean frequency has also increased from 30 to 36.

##### Rates: Student-initiated violence against direct student support workers, Ontario



##### Mean frequency: Student-initiated violence against direct student support workers, Ontario



“

*I have personally watched the violence go from 0 to 100 in my 17 years working for the school board. It is unacceptable and should not be happening within a school or anywhere else. It’s disheartening that it is kept a secret and not talked about.*

– Educational Assistant, K-8

# 1.4









## EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS: UNDervalUED & UNDERPAID

*“Somehow the role of an Educational Assistant who helped little Johnny read and write transformed into ‘get geared up and get to work’.” – Educational Assistant, K-3*

The nature of the work educational assistants do has changed dramatically – transitioning away from supporting students academically to managing behaviours. One educational assistant (K-4) wrote:

*My job as an EA is not at all what it was like when I started. EAs used to assist with learning. We supported frustrated learners by tutoring, following up after teachers’ lessons, running our own language or math circles, and so on. We became an adult students could trust, a friendly advocate. An adult who could employ strategies to help them regulate before they became frustrated or acted out in an aggressive manner. In the first 20 years, I was never attacked or struck; whereas today, it is a common occurrence.*

**Today, being an Educational Assistant means earning, on average, just \$25/hour\* and...**

-  **Experiencing the highest rates and frequencies of student-initiated violence:** 98% of educational assistants surveyed had experienced student-initiated violence during the 2022-2023 school year. On average, they experienced 36 unique instances.
-  **Being told that violence is *part of the job*:** *“When we complained, the principal told us to leave our EA positions and find a new career because experiencing violence and harassment on a daily basis was part of our job/role.”* (Educational Assistant, LTO)
-  **Wearing ‘padding’ to go to work:** *“I am treated as a punching bag and they just want me to put layers of personal protective equipment on to lessen the blows. It does not protect my loss of vision and hearing.”* (Educational Assistant, K-12)
-  **Going home sore, bruised, and injured:** *“It is getting harder and harder to do this job. We are not respected and daily get sworn at, hit, bit, pinched, punched, and have items thrown at us. We go home with injuries every single day. This is not okay.”* (Educational Assistant, K-8)
-  **Being overworked:** *“We are chronically short-staffed in a school with a lot of needs. We are regularly missing at least two EAs every day and we do not have enough supply staff to fill these positions.”* (Educational Assistant, K-4)
-  **Feeling disheartened and disillusioned:** *“It’s exhausting to focus on behaviours when there are so many educational and social-emotional needs you could be helping. It’s the feeling that hits you as you wake knowing you’ll be treated like a doormat.”* (Educational Assistant, K-3)
-  **Having your role dismissed and devalued:** *“EAs work the closest with students yet are rarely invited to meetings or included in any sort of planning. We are micromanaged and blamed.”* (Educational Assistant, K-8)
-  **Lacking adequate pay and benefits:** *“We need to be paid a living wage so that we don’t have to work second and third jobs after dealing with violence and harassment at school all day.”* (Educational Assistant, K-6)

# *Section 2:* *Harassment*

“

*Students are swearing, mimicking my accent, and using abusive language. It is very offensive, belittling, and insulting. I'm becoming disenchanted with a career that I was once very passionate about. The disrespectful and abusive behaviours of students are getting progressively worse. Students seem to believe that they can do and say whatever they want. I fear for the future of society.*

– Educational Assistant, K-8

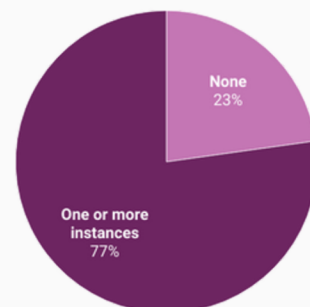
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## 2.1

# RATES OF STUDENT-INITIATED HARASSMENT ARE SHOCKING

Overall, rates of harassment experienced by education sector workers in Ontario are outrageously high. Indeed, 88% of respondents experienced at least one instance of harassment from any of the four sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, administrators). When we focus on student-initiated harassment, over three-quarters (77%) of workers surveyed had experienced one or more instances during the 2022-2023 school year. These experiences were often not isolated interactions – indeed, respondents reported an average of 19 unique instances of student-initiated harassment during the 2022-2023 school year.

Rate of student-initiated harassment



*The most common forms of student-initiated harassment:*

1. Over two-thirds (68%) of participants had their authority and expertise disrespected, not recognized, or belittled.
2. The majority (59%) of respondents experienced explicit verbal insults, put-downs, and/or obscene gestures.
3. Half of the workers surveyed (50%) reported subtle remarks, jokes, or innuendos that ridicule, demean, or offend.

“

*Grade 1 student called me an idiot, asshole, and told me to fuck off when I was trying to do my job and work with them.*

– Educational Assistant, K-8

## Student-initiated workplace harassment looks like...

### Profanity

*Kindergarten student calling a teacher a ‘fucking cunt’ and other swear words in front of other students.*

– Subject Specialist, K-6

### Cruel comments

*I said good morning to a student, and they replied, ‘Go fuck yourself, and lie in a hole and die’.*

– Library Worker, K-4

### False accusations

*Students are constantly accusing teachers of being pedophiles, as well as yelling racist and anti-Semitic slurs.*

– Classroom Teacher, 7-12

### Sexual harassment

*As a woman, having male students make lewd sexual gestures towards me.*

– Classroom Teacher, K-8

### Racial slurs

*Students always use my race against me, calling me a Black Bitch or the N word.*

– Educational Assistant, K-4

### Homophobia

*Students calling me a fucking faggot after I came out to them as a teaching moment.*

– Classroom Teacher, K-8

### Demeaning ‘jokes’

*I carry weight in my stomach. One kid asked me if I was pregnant and I said ‘no’. They continued to ask pregnancy-related questions daily.*

– Educational Assistant, K-8

### Disrespect of authority

*Students telling teachers to fuck off, calling them whores, sticking up middle fingers, and telling them they won’t do what they are told.*

– Classroom Teacher, K-6

### Inappropriate remarks

*I have heard students make comments about teachers’ bra sizes. I have had students tell me that I ‘look good for my age’.*

– Resource Teacher, 9-12

## 2.2

# THE RISING TIDE OF PARENT-INITIATED HARASSMENT

Relationships between parents and education sector workers appear to be devolving (see graph below). Almost half of respondents (47%) experienced one or more instances of harassment from a parent and they experienced an average of nearly 4 instances of parent-initiated harassment during the 2022-2023 school year. A number of participants wrote about tensions arising in school drop-off or pick-up areas: *“Parents shouting and threatening and showing fists towards me because I guided the cars to park away from the bus zone”* (Child and Youth Worker, K-8).

We also see parents frustrated and aggrieved by the education system’s inability to meet their child(ren)’s needs. It is, of course, deeply problematic that their anger at the lack of resources and supports — the inevitable consequence of two decades worth of austerity-driven cuts (see Section 6) — is directed towards education sector workers: *“Parents yelling at educators and demeaning them in front of other educators because they felt their child was not getting enough support”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 6).

“A parent called and was incredibly rude and disrespectful. He told me to ‘stop doing the bare minimum and get off my ass and go above and beyond once in a while’. He wouldn’t listen to anything I said and just continued to talk and yell over me in a very angry tone.

– Library Worker, K-8

Our analyses revealed significant differences in experiences across education sector occupations, with teachers and clerical workers experiencing the highest rates and frequencies of parent-initiated harassment.

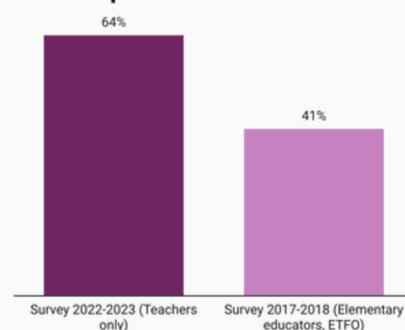
## Clerical Workers

Disturbingly, not only did 69% of clerical workers experience harassment from a parent(s), but the experience was also recurrent — on average, they reported 6.8 unique instances during the 2022-2023 school year. One clerical worker wrote: *“Parents get very defensive and offensive with office staff.”* Clerical workers’ vulnerability to parent-initiated harassment is largely an artifact of being the first point of contact: *“We’ve all been yelled at on the phone by parents who are upset with the system, the admin, and take it out on us”* (Clerical Worker, K-12). The impact of staff shortages (another consequence of deep funding cuts) is also felt in the office — one clerical worker (K-8) wrote: *“With not enough staff in the office, we receive backlash from frustrated parents,”* another worker (K-8) found themselves placating, *“while parents are berating me, I smile, nod, and apologize.”*

## Teachers

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of teachers in our sample faced harassment from parents at least once in the 2022-2023 school year; on average, they experienced 5.9 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 over the phone, as well as relentless communications through online platforms: *“Daily emails, notes, and phone calls with accusations, complaints, and demands”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 2).

Rates of parent-initiated harassment





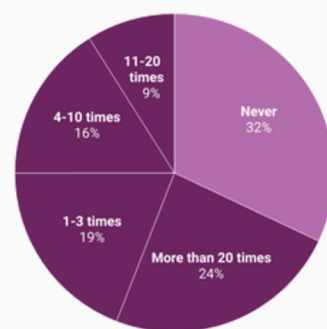
## 2.3

# THE TOXIC WORK ENVIRONMENT EQUATION

## The ubiquity of harassment

As we saw in 2.1, harassment directed towards education sector workers is ubiquitous. It is, therefore, unsurprising that more than two-thirds of respondents (68%) witnessed student-initiated harassment directed towards their co-workers (on average, more than 10 unique instances). In addition, over 40% reported witnessing parent-initiated harassment at least once during the 2022-2023 school year. The pervasiveness of harassment – in classrooms, hallways, schoolyards, cafeterias, libraries, and offices – impacts everyone, including witnesses. One clerical worker (K-12) wrote: *“There is major disrespect towards education workers from students – every day they are cursed at. I’ve witnessed parents that are just as bad; screaming and cursing at staff. It affects the atmosphere of work and makes me hate being in the school sometimes.”*

Witnessing student-initiated harassment: Frequency



## Increased student incivility

Workplace harassment exists alongside increasing levels of incivility – defined as “low-intensity deviant behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of norms for mutual respect” (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). As one secondary school teacher explained, *“the level of opposition and disregard for a teacher’s authority in the classroom is rising, and especially so since COVID. It’s like some students have forgotten how to be a part of the school community and how to respect others. It happens almost daily that a student refuses to listen to me. It’s exhausting.”* Not only is there “evidence that classroom incivility in both children and adolescents has increased as a result of pandemic-related school shutdowns” (Spadafora et al., 2024, p. 8), but our research reveals that 91% of respondents felt that students’ behavioural difficulties had somewhat or significantly worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.

*“I have been told to , ‘shut the fuck up’, I’ve been told ‘Who the fuck do you think you are to tell me what to do? You’re just a fucking Secretary!’”*  
– Clerical Worker, K-6

## A toxic work environment

The pervasiveness of harassment from students and parents, combined with increasing levels of incivility among students who appear to have *“forgotten how to be part of the school community,”* creates *“a stressful and tense work environment”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 9). These challenges are further compounded by a school context characterized by growing needs and dwindling resources (see 6.1). The result is a toxic work environment. As one classroom teacher (K-4) eloquently described:

**“***It’s hard for me to point to specific incidents. The overall environment is one of fear and hopelessness: with all of the vandalism, the aggressive and rude students, the walking on eggshells, and the constant screaming and crying of young dysregulated kids in the hallways. It’s all unsettling, uncomfortable, and leaves me feeling hopeless.*

# ***Section 3:*** ***Reporting & Responses***

“

*Currently, many teachers have stopped reporting because nothing effective happens. In fact, the response is often to heap the blame and more expectations on the teacher, and when that fails, to put them into Kevlar. There is no recognition by the employer or the government that the violence needs to end. They go through the motions of reporting and sometimes, debriefing, but only because there are laws saying they must. There's no commitment to do anything to end or even reduce violence.*

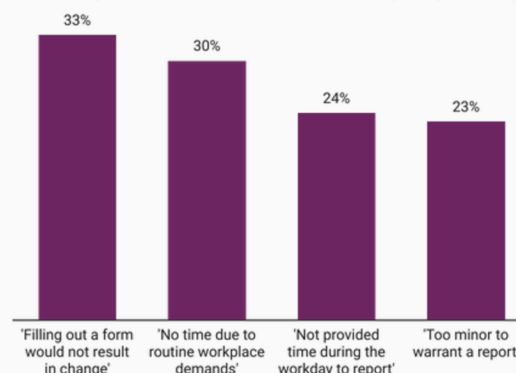
*– Special Education Teacher, Grade 4-8*

## 3.1

# INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO FORMAL REPORTING

Seventy-two percent of survey respondents said they had experienced one or more instances of violence or harassment during the 2022-2023 school year that could have been formally reported but was not. While participants experienced, on average, 22.5 unique incidents of violence, more than one in three (38%) did not report any incidents. It would appear that underreporting continues. This, despite the concerted efforts of education sector unions and federations to encourage reporting, and in spite of Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act* mandating the reporting of workplace violence and harassment. This begs the question, why?

Primary reasons for not formally reporting



### Lack of impact

Education sector workers' unwillingness to formally report workplace violence is shaped by their past experiences that doing so had not resulted in additional supports or meaningful solutions. As we see in the above graph, one in three respondents (33%) were disillusioned, concluding that reporting was futile: *"Violence is happening too often, and staff are becoming complacent. Incidents are not getting reported because the outcome doesn't change, and staff don't feel heard"* (Educational Assistant, LTO).

### Lack of time

A number of respondents described that the reporting process itself is time-consuming: *"It takes over 30 min to complete ONE report – that's our entire lunchtime if we are lucky enough to even get a lunch"* (Sign Language Interpreter, K-12). Participants noted that they were expected to complete forms on their own time: *"Staff aren't given time to collect their thoughts and fill out reports. No one wants to fill out these reports on unpaid time"* (Educational Assistant, K-8). Moreover, the process is not only arduous but can also be revictimizing: *"It's too traumatic, I don't want to remember or talk about it again"* (Educational Assistant, K-8).

### Lack of access

Participants also drew attention to issues within the reporting systems themselves. These included software issues (e.g., *"the reporting system is so slow"*), lack of access to necessary information (e.g., *"EAs don't have students' OENs"*), and lack of the technology required to complete a report (e.g., *"the principal refused me access to a computer [to report]. As an itinerant teacher within the school, I did not have an assigned laptop"*). Concerningly, 14% of participants were discouraged from reporting by their administrator or supervisor; and 8% indicated they simply did not know when or how to report incidents of workplace violence or harassment.

“

*We are already overwhelmed with the workload and the reporting process is demanding. We are told to write out what happened, we have to find the form online and fill it out. Then, we may be called in to discuss the event. This is very time-consuming and therefore, we only do it for big events. We cannot possibly be expected to do this on a daily basis. There needs to be an easier way to report.*

– Classroom Teacher, Grade 8

## 3.2 ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSES: BLAMING, SHAMING & NEGATING

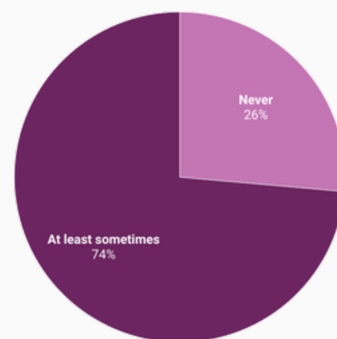
As we saw in 3.1, rates of formal reporting are low. Despite this, education sector workers appear to be prepared to informally report – by telling their administrator(s) or supervisor(s) about instances of workplace violence and harassment. Indeed, 69% of respondents informally reported ‘always’ or ‘most of the time.’ The remaining 17% informally reported ‘sometimes’; 14% ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’.

Among those who did not ‘always’ inform their supervisor, 19% indicated that the incident(s) was too minor to informally report. Another common reason for not informally reporting was a lack of time – indeed, 20% of respondents indicated that routine workplace demands left them with little time to share the information. Finally, one in five respondents (21%) indicated that talking to their administrator(s) or supervisor(s) about these kinds of incidents would not be helpful. Informally reporting can also be counterproductive for some, either because the incident is minimized and normalized, or because the worker is blamed and shamed.

### Normalizing & minimizing

The very ubiquity of workplace violence in the education sector has resulted in its normalization. When violence is ‘normal’ and routinely framed as “*part of the job*,” it would appear that acts and experiences that do not cause immediate or serious physical injuries are being “*brushed off as no big deal*.” Moreover, the impacts and harms caused by workplace violence are trivialized and negated. Participants were told: “*suck it up and get back to work*,” “*don't worry. They call all male teachers perverts & pedophiles*,” “*what can a 4-year-old do to you?*” and “*kids will be kids*.” Understandably, education sector workers are frustrated: “*Nowhere in my collective agreement does it say I should be physically assaulted. It is not part of my job description. Yet it happens daily*” (Early Childhood Educator, K-6).

Experiences of violence and/or harassment being minimized



1/3

were blamed for the violence and harassment they experienced

### Blaming & shaming

Not only do administrators and supervisors normalize workplace violence and minimize its impacts, we heard repeatedly how they: failed to acknowledge the systemic underpinnings of violence, downloaded responsibility onto workers, and blamed them for the violence they experienced. One ECE (K-3) wrote: “*I was seated in a Kindergarten chair with a small group. A student who was denied a juice box ran up behind me, grabbed me by my hair, and pulled me backwards over the chair causing two of my ribs to dislocate and damaging my neck muscles. I was reprimanded by my Admin for ‘putting myself in that position’ and ‘if I had my (shoulder length) hair in a ponytail it would have hurt less’ and I was told I ‘shouldn’t have had my back to this student’. Not once was I supported.*”

Blame, shame, negation, and minimizing are individualizing tactics that shift responsibility from structures onto individuals. Not only is this emotionally distressing for workers, it also functions as a powerful disincentive for reporting. Underreporting, in turn, risks further obscuring the prevalence of workplace violence and harassment in schools and contributes to invisibilising the problem.



### 3.3

## INSTITUTIONAL ‘SOLUTIONS,’ STRATEGIES & SUPPORTS?

On this page, we present the institutional responses to workplace violence against education sector workers and the strategies used to manage and mitigate its harms. We then reflect on the limitations of these strategies which are all too often inadequate, ineffective, or not implemented at all.

The institutional strategies that can be deployed to manage, respond to, or mitigate the harms of violence and harassment include safety plans, behaviour management plans, personal protective equipment (PPE), and consequencing or removing the student from the classroom/school.

### Two-thirds

reported that the actions taken to deal with violence and harassment were

**‘not effective’**

**Safety Plans are frequently put in place but often ineffective.** 67% of respondents indicated that safety plans were either ‘always’, ‘often’, or ‘occasionally’ put in place or updated following instances of violence. However, while 35% said safety plans were effective (‘somewhat’ or ‘very’), more (45%) indicated that they were ineffective (‘somewhat’ or ‘very’).

**Behaviour Management Plans are uncommon and considered largely ineffective.** Nearly half of participants (48%) indicated that behaviour management plans were ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ put in place following incidents of harassment. Over half (52%) indicated that they were either ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ ineffective; just 27% said they were effective.

**PPE is not a solution, but a lack of access is a problem.** By definition, PPE affirms that violence is ‘part of the job’ – padding the body of the worker without addressing the root causes. It is also uncomfortable, alienating for students (see 5.4), and far from fail-safe: *“PPE that actually covers the areas kids go for would be great”* (Educational Assistant, K-4). Disturbingly, some workers were threatened with PPE (*“Told if we don’t want to wear Kevlar, we shouldn’t report”*), others were promised gear but *“it didn’t arrive before the end of the school year”* (Educational Assistant, K-6).

*“Telling us to bake muffins and wear Kevlar is not going to fix these issues.”*

– Educational Assistant, LTO

**Students are not consistently held accountable.** Education sector workers expressed frustration at the lack of meaningful (if any at all) consequences for violent and harassing behaviours (e.g., *“the student did not even have to apologize”*). The perception is that the failure to consequence bad behaviour both normalizes it and empowers students: *“Daily verbal abuse and negative threatening comments go unaddressed so students quickly learn that they could get away with it”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 9-12). At times, students are reprimanded and/or consequenced – ranging from apologizing to short time-outs to being sent to the office to informal removals to suspensions.

### **And sometimes, help doesn’t come...**

All too often, participants described a chronic lack of support. They noted that calls to administrators for help went unanswered, debriefs were not offered, and human (e.g., EAs, CYWs) and material (e.g., walkie-talkies, quiet rooms) resources were not forthcoming. At the same time, many respondents acknowledge the efforts of their administrators and recognize that *“admin is run off their feet with frequent violent and chaotic situations”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 9-12). As such, they appreciate that *“school administrators don’t get a lot of support from the school board, meaning they can’t support us in the way that they probably wish they could”* (CYW, K-6).



# ***Section 4:*** ***Differences &*** ***Diversity***

“

*As far as the harassment goes, honestly, I am exhausted. Before I had this job, I found so much joy in dressing a little differently, in being a little quirky. Those things are so important to my sense of self and dignity; now I feel panicked whenever my voice pitches a little too high, or if my wrists are too limp, or if I don't talk the way people think I should. My identity is Charter protected, but in the past, when I've told admin at other jobs, it's only gotten worse. So, I guess I have to just keep folding myself up and hiding away the best parts of myself until I can find another job where it is safer for me to be just a little different.*

– Educational Assistant, LTO

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# 4.1

## GENDERED VIOLENCE & HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplace violence in the education sector is gendered violence not only because it is a women-dominated workforce but also because women experience more violence and harassment. Administrative responses to incidents of violence and harassment are also shaped by gender stereotypes (e.g., maternal) and expectations (e.g., women should be accommodating).

### Student violence

Women respondents experienced dramatically higher rates of violence from students (90% v. 72%) and on average, twice as many incidents than those who identified as men ( $M = 23$  v. 11). The violence is often accompanied by gendered slurs, sexualized behaviours, and derogatory put-downs. The sexual nature of violence from students was described repeatedly: *“My butt has been slapped, my breasts have been groped, and I have had threats of violence on me because students believe I was lesser. The exact words were ‘You’re a woman, you can’t do anything if I hit you’”* (Educational Assistant, K-8).

### Student harassment

Nearly four in five women respondents (79%) experienced student-initiated harassment (compared to 68% of men): in particular, women were subjected to more insults and disrespect. Furthermore, women also experienced higher rates of sexual harassment from students (17% v. 13%). As one grade 9 teacher wrote: *“The incidences of sexual assault on staff by students are astronomical. [...] EAs are repeatedly touched in the genitals. Breasts are pinched. I have had a student put a phone between my legs and videotape me. The student was 14. It took me years to get over this. So many conflicting emotions.”*

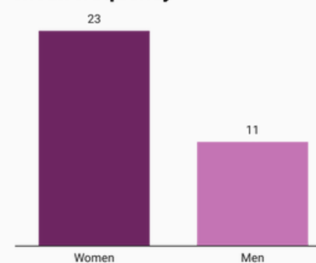
### Parent harassment

Nearly half of women respondents (48%) experienced parent-initiated harassment (compared to 40% of men). Harassment from parents typically manifests as insults: *“Parent called me a ‘feminist clown’ and made other negative remarks about women. He also called a Kindergarten EA a bitch in front of the children”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 1-2). Another wrote: *“I felt the dad had no respect for women because he thought it was OK to stand a foot away and yell in my face”* (Early Childhood Educator, K-6).

### Gendered tropes & normative expectations

Gender emerges as significant both in relation to expectations and responses. Women are assumed to be mothering and nurturing: *“As a woman ECE, I’ve been slotted into the role of caregiver by admin and society. Therefore, I am to embrace being hit and abused at work.”* When women challenge these normative expectations, they risk being dismissed as “hysterical,” “whiny,” and “dramatic.” One high school teacher wrote: *“My principal finds me ‘overly emotional’. Am I allowed to be overly-emotional after being verbally and physically assaulted three times by one student, and harassed for seven months by a parent?”*

Student-initiated violence:  
Mean frequency



“A student masturbated behind a teacher and made horrible sexual sounds. He threatened her with gun signs. The principal excused the behaviour saying ‘boys will be boys’. This hurt our entire staff.

– Classroom Teacher,  
Grade 10

48% of women experienced  
harassment from parents



“We are an occupation that is majority women. School boards handle workplace violence against women the same way the justice system does: the victim gets told off, while the perpetrator is allowed to roam free.

– School Social Worker

## 4.2

# CONFRONTING & NAVIGATING RACISM IN THE WORKPLACE

*“I have been a teacher for 23 years, speak fluent English, yet many times when I am in a new school, I am mistaken for an EA or DECE because most elementary school teachers are white.” – Resource Teacher, K-4*

The number of participants from each unique racial group (e.g., Indigenous, Black, Asian) was not sufficiently large for statistical analysis; as such, participants were categorized as racially minoritized or white. While such homogeneous terms risk oversimplifying educators’ experiences, the use of a collective category provides sufficient statistical power to analyze race-based differences.

Racially minoritized education sector workers described how racial tropes and slurs were weaponized (e.g., *“the use of the N-word is rampant”*), and how stereotypical assumptions inform interactions at work (e.g., *“My East Asian ethnicity makes others believe I am submissive”*). The lack of diversity within the workplace itself also shapes experiences. Workers described feeling alienated: *“As a person of colour it feels strange to see so much diversity among the students yet hardly any diversity among the staff. For me, it can feel othering”* (Classroom Teacher, K-6).

It would appear that racially minoritized education sector workers are burdened with additional (often unseen) labour: *“As one of few minority teachers, a lot of students come to me for support”* (Subject Specialist Teacher, K-8). In addition to doing this supplemental care work, they are also managing racism, dealing with micro-aggressions, and may find themselves responsibilised for diversity work. One teacher (K-6) wrote, *“as a person of colour in a mostly white staff, I am often leaned on to point out equity and diversity issues.”*

## Racially minoritized education sector workers are more likely to...

### **Have their experiences minimized**

One in six racially minoritized participants (16%) reported that the violence and harassment they experienced was ‘always’ minimized by their administrator; this was the case for 11% of white education sector workers.

### **Be blamed for violence and harassment**

Racially minoritized workers indicated that they were blamed (‘always’ or ‘very often’) by their administrator for the violence and harassment they experienced 50% more often than were white participants.

### **Experience a reprisal for reporting**

One in nine racially minoritized education sector workers (11%) experienced a reprisal for reporting incidents of workplace violence or harassment. Conversely, the reprisal rate was 8% among white respondents.

## **Racially minoritized workers informally report incidents less often**

Given that racially minoritized workers in the education sector are more likely to have their experiences minimized, be blamed for violence and harassment, and face a reprisal, it is unsurprising that they are also less likely to informally report instances of violence and/or harassment to their administrator(s) or supervisor(s). In real terms, this means these workers are less likely to receive even the minimal support or resources available.

## 4.3

# MENTAL HEALTH, HOSTILITY & HARASSMENT

Workers with a diagnosed mental illness experience elevated rates of harassment from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators. 95% of respondents who identified as having a mental illness experienced harassment during the 2022-2023 school year and they reported an average of 47 unique instances (compared to 31 among those who did not so identify). They also experienced...

**1 Disproportionate levels of harassment from students:** Compared to 75% of all participants, 85% of workers who identified as having a mental disorder experienced student-initiated harassment. These respondents noted that mental health challenges exacerbate the impacts: *“I experienced emotional and physical abuse as a child and teen. These experiences make me empathetic and give me the tools to work with children. But many of the situations I’m in at school are triggering and I’m frequently in a heightened state”* (Educational Assistant, LTO).

**2 Dramatically more parent-initiated harassment:** Workers with a diagnosed mental illness reported higher rates of parent-initiated harassment (61% v. 47%). They also experienced such harassment more often: 5.6 unique instances compared to 3.5 among workers who did not so identify. These workers also experienced over 50% more disrespect of authority from parents ( $M = 2.6$  v. 1.6).

**3 Forty percent greater chance of harassment from administrators:** Participants who identified as having a diagnosed mental disorder were much more likely to experience harassment from their administrator or supervisor. Indeed, over half (54%) reported such experiences compared to 39% among those who did not so identify. One classroom teacher (Grade 4) wrote, *“I was told my medical condition was ‘not bad.’ My administrator spoke poorly about me in front of parents. I have been referred to by my limitations and not by my name.”*

**4 Higher risk of reprisal:** Workers reporting a diagnosed mental illness were twice as likely to experience a reprisal (14% v. 7%). They were also less likely to report violence and harassment despite greater exposure. Willingness to report may also be conditioned by their experiences of increased blame (46% v. 33%), more frequent minimization ( $M = 1.6$  v. 1.4), and feeling less fairly treated ( $M = 3.1$  v. 2.7).

**5 Ableist work environment:** Participants with a diagnosed mental illness recount recurrent discrimination, problematic language, and failures to accommodate – all of which are markers of ableism. For example, one clerical worker (K-8) wrote: *“My mental health was constantly brought up, there were constant mentions of how ‘I’m crazy’ and ‘need my meds adjusted’. I no longer feel safe in my workplace and I can no longer rely on the board to support me.”*

### Sometimes ‘disability’ is a superpower...

While the ableist work environment and elevated rates of harassment and reprisals are deeply troubling, education sector workers highlighted that their experiences afford them the empathy and insights to support and relate to struggling students. One educational assistant (K-6) wrote: *“Having a learning disability and anxiety, I am better at being able to understand the children and what they are going through. I use some of the strategies that I use for myself to help them.”*



## 4.4

# ANTI-2SLGBTQIA+ CULTURE SEEPS INTO WORKPLACE INTERACTIONS

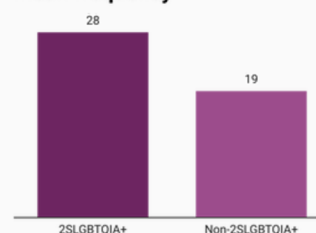
It would appear that increasingly pervasive anti-2SLGBTQIA+ discourses are contributing to a growing sense of hostility in the workplace. Workers repeatedly described how “*hate is seeping into the classroom*” and creating an environment that is both stressful and unsafe.

## Anti-2SLGBTQIA+ manifests in interactions with...

### Students

Education sector workers who belong to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community encounter disproportionate levels of student-initiated harassment (85% v. 77%) and experience nearly twice as many unique incidents ( $M = 28$  v. 19). One LTO high school teacher described these experiences as triggering: “*I hear discriminatory slurs daily, not directed towards me because I am not out to the students, but I’m still facing it all the time and having to go through the exhausting discussion about why we can’t use such words. It impacts my mental health.*”

Student-initiated harassment: Mean frequency



### Parents

Not only do 2SLGBTQIA+ education sector workers experience higher rates (60% v. 45%) and greater frequencies ( $M = 7.4$  v. 3.6) of parent-initiated harassment, they also navigate broader anti-2SLGBTQIA+ mobilization – “*During this time of ‘parental rights’ and the mis- and disinformation surrounding 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion in schools, I worry that parents will accuse me of ‘grooming children’ or ‘glorifying’ my queer and trans existence by refusing to be invisible*” (Educational Assistant, LTO).

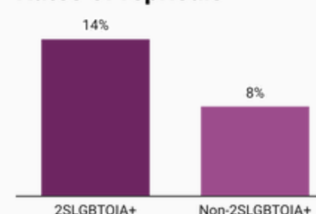
60% experience parent-initiated harassment



### Administrators

2SLGBTQIA+ workers also experience transphobia and homophobia from administrators. Not only did they report greater frequencies of harassment from administrators ( $M = 7$  v. 4), they were also 75% more likely to experience reprisals for reporting instances of violence or harassment: “*I mentioned to a class that some families have two mommies or two daddies. Admin called me into a meeting to reprimand me*” (Occasional Teacher, K-12).

Rates of reprisals



### Navigating transphobia and homophobia

In the context of problematic interactions, elevated levels of harassment, and widespread trans- and homophobia, a number of education sector workers told us they do not feel safe at work and therefore, manage their risk by closeting their sexual or gender identities: “*I feel I have had to ‘go back in the closet’ a bit because it doesn’t always feel safe to be out at work*” (DECE, K-8). Some workers find themselves conflicted: “*I am hesitant to disclose my identity as a gay man in school communities for fear of reprisals or questioning from administration. It is difficult to navigate the tension between wanting to be a visible role model and representation for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and not wanting to expose myself to negative attention from students, parents, colleagues, and superiors*” (Subject Specialist, 9-12).



## 4.5

# ATTENDING TO INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

In the preceding pages, we have seen that education sector workers who identify as women, 2SLGBTQIA+, or as having a diagnosed mental illness experience higher rates and greater frequencies of student-initiated harassment. We have also seen that education sector workers who identify as racially minoritized, 2SLGBTQIA+, or having a diagnosed mental disorder are more likely to face reprisals for reporting workplace violence or harassment. In short, identities matter.

### *Intersectionality is...*

“a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles” (Crenshaw, 1989).

Of course, identity markers do not exist in isolation – they intersect and compound (see sidebar). Previous research found, for example, that women educators who identify as racially minoritized and disabled experience the highest frequency of harassment from administrators (Santor et al., 2025). While analyzing the multiplicity of intersections is beyond the scope of this report; the quotations below illustrate some of the ways intersecting identities are ‘read’ in relation to stereotypes and in turn, condition vulnerability to, experiences of, and responses to workplace violence and harassment.

“*I think that my being a queer, neurodivergent woman played into how seriously I was taken and the support I was given. I had a change in admin this year and he was able to get me support within a week. Whereas, I put a student referral in last March and even though I followed up, I never received any meetings or resources.*

– Special Education Teacher, K-6

“*As an East Asian woman teacher, there are many times I am disrespected by male students. They say racist comments (which they learn at home), such as ‘chink’ or make the slant eyes. I find that I deal with more racism from students in urban than rural schools.*

– Classroom Teacher, Grade 1

“*I hate to think it, but sometimes I wonder if I was a man if my advocacy for myself and my health would have been taken more seriously. Would my department head say I was an ‘inspiration to all for prioritizing self-care’ after my serious anxiety attack if I was a man?*

– Resource Teacher, 9-12

“*I visibly identify as a Muslim woman and because of this it is often assumed that I am not knowledgeable in my field. People also assume certain aspects about me and these assumptions are often based on the stereotypes that are portrayed in the media about Muslims.*

– Clerical Worker, LTO

“*As I've gotten older, I've felt invisible at work, like I don't matter. Because I am an older female with a disability, I am replaceable. A student was actually moved into my class in January from another class. The message was I should have this student because who cares if she hurts me.*

– Classroom Teacher, Grade 3

# ***Section 5:*** ***Ripples &*** ***Repercussions***

“











*In the moment, we have empathy and compassion for the student. We are calm, but after it is finished, you feel like you have crashed. Sometimes it can take an hour to calm down after the escalation. I worry about the education of the other students in the classroom. Also, the staff have said to each other that after a day like that, we come home with nothing left physically or emotionally to give to our own families.*

*– Classroom Teacher, Kindergarten*

# 5.1

## IMPACTS RIPPLE THROUGH WORKERS' PERSONAL LIVES

It is inevitable that working in a violence-filled environment (see 1.2), where acts of verbal and physical aggression are normalized (see 3.2), will have profound impacts on workers. The wide-ranging effects include negative impacts on...

-  **Physical health:** *"I am chronically exhausted, my immune system is functioning abnormally, my anxiety and stress levels are escalated, and my blood pressure is on the verge of requiring medication to control it."* (Educational Assistant, K-6)
-  **Mental wellbeing:** *"Watching students cause destruction is damaging to my mental health. It causes anxiety, anger, frustration, and a profound sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Something needs to be done about these out-of-control students."* (Library Worker, K-6)
-  **Quality of life:** *"I suffered from a concussion and I lost physical and cognitive abilities. My personality changed, I had sudden onset of dissociation and suicidal ideation. I required long-term hospitalization and was diagnosed with PTSD."* (Educational Assistant, Occasional)
-  **Lifestyle:** *"To be honest, I am really struggling with my job the last few years and find it harder and harder. I try to exercise, stay healthy, and be social, but I find I am so tired. I also don't have the stamina that I used to. My enjoyment of life is lacking."* (Educational Assistant, K-6)
-  **Consumption patterns:** *"Cannabis and crying myself to sleep. With the \$23 an hour I earn, the lack of affordable therapy, and the fact that nothing ever changes, the only way to make the situation go away is to use cannabis to forget about work."* (Clerical Worker, K-6)
-  **Energy levels:** *"I am exhausted and do not feel like doing anything after school. Some days I don't even have energy to make something for dinner. If I am lucky, I will have a bowl of cereal."* (Educational Assistant, K-6)
-  **Intimate relationships:** *"When I get home, I complain, I am grumpy, and I am exhausted. My husband is discouraged because I am too worried about work; he feels powerless and unable to help me. So we have fights."* (Subject Specialist Teacher, Kindergarten)
-  **Parenting:** *"By the time I get home to my own child I am so tapped out of patience and energy. I am overstimulated and short. Sometimes I feel so sad that I give so much to other peoples' children that I have so little of myself left to give my own child."* (Educational Assistant, LTO)
-  **Social engagement:** *"Being hyper vigilant and trying to manage student behaviours without enough EA support every day is exhausting. I have a lot less energy for my friends and social life than I would like. I just sleep a lot."* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 9-11)
-  **Financial wellbeing:** *"I would become so stressed knowing that bus duty was coming soon and I would have to deal with bad behaviour. I have made radical changes this year by NOT doing bus duty but because it is less hours, it has affected my income."* (Library Worker, K-6)

The high rates and frequencies of violence, coupled with widespread normalization and minimization, have a cumulative impact on workers wellbeing: *"Seeing or even hearing the violence triggers me because of past experiences in the classroom"* (Classroom Teacher, K-6). Moreover, it would appear that the lack of recognition, and the demoralizing public and political narratives about education sector workers, further compound the impacts on workers.

## 5.2

# WORKPLACE VIOLENCE: PROFESSIONAL COSTS ADD UP

Working in an environment where violence is ubiquitous (see 1.2) necessarily impacts feelings of security at work. Workers who experience violence, as well as those who witness it, report feeling “unsafe in [their] work environment,” “afraid to come to work,” and “anxious, distressed, and frustrated.” Education sector workers also describe “being nervous, walking on egg shells, locking doors, and looking before [they] turn the corner” (Educational Assistant, K-8). On this page, we first examine the impact violence and its management has on workers’ professional practices and then, turn to consider the strategies workers deploy to cope with its fallout.

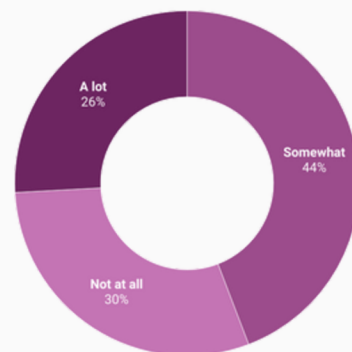
“It is always unnerving to see my co-workers physically assaulted. It leaves you with a heightened sense of insecurity at work and being in a constant state of high alert.

– Early Childhood Educator, K-6

### Conveying curriculum

When educational assistants are routinely pulled away from their tasks to “put out fires” elsewhere, and teachers find themselves managing disruptions in the classrooms, supervising evacuations, and dealing with the aftermath of violent incidents, it is unsurprising that educators are unable to convey curriculum: “The are no resources for teachers to use and everyone is expecting teachers to do more with less. Days are spent managing students and not actually teaching them. Kids have to evacuate classrooms daily for one student and this is just normal now” (Classroom Teacher, Grade 4-5).

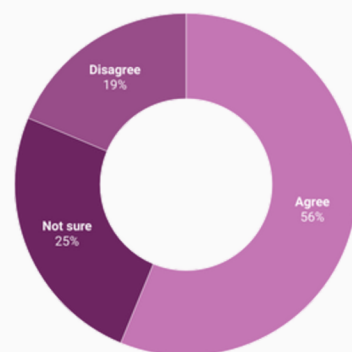
### Impact of violence on workers' ability to do their jobs



### Changing or leaving the field

Educators are dedicated professionals – over and over again, we read about how “fulfilling, joyful, and challenging” it is to work with students. However, in the face of increasingly untenable workplaces, many workers are either quiet quitting (e.g., “I stopped volunteering, coaching, or being available to students after school”), taking leaves, or considering abandoning their careers altogether. Indeed, over half of respondents (56%) agreed: ‘If I could get an equally well-paying job, I would leave the education sector’. Many are leaving the field: “Ultimately, leaving the school I once loved was what I had to do. I have never before had anxiety or mental health issues in my 25-year career. I am mentally exhausted and broken” (Educational Assistant, K-6).

### 'If I could get an equally well-paying job, I would leave the education sector'



“

Education is a soul crushing job that many people feel trapped in. We are a damaged group of workers who feel a lot of guilt advocating for ourselves and will continue to sacrifice our wellbeing, mental health, and family lives in the service of other people's children. It's fucked up.

– Library Worker, K-6

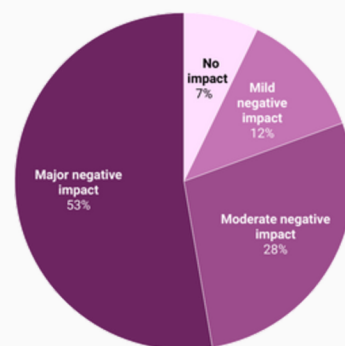


## 5.3

# DISRUPTED CLASSROOMS & DIMINISHED STUDENT LEARNING

The professional impacts of workplace violence (see 5.2) translate into learning impacts. Notably, 93% of respondents asserted that witnessing violence has negative impacts on student learning. Research has found much the same thing: “Witnessing school violence [is] associated with lower academic achievement” and “decreased academic engagement” (Janosz et al., 2018, p. 1119). One classroom teacher (K-3) wrote: *“Instructional time is lost every time I have to stop teaching to resolve aggression. When another class is repeatedly evacuated, not only are they losing their instructional time, but so are we when they join us.”* Indeed, student learning is diminished when curriculum is not covered, learning is lost, and educational supports are unavailable.

Impact of witnessing violence on student learning



## Curriculum is not covered

*“Lessons are constantly being interrupted and the grade expectations can not be met due to the time spent dealing with violent children.”*

– Classroom Teacher,  
Grade 6

As we saw in 5.2, educators’ capacity to convey curriculum is undermined by disruptions, evacuations, and violent incidents in the classroom. As such, students do not have access to the curriculum they should: *“We are FAILING our children. They are graduating without learning what they need to be contributing members of society because too much time is used managing behaviours and NOT teaching. Teachers are trying to help, but the workload and expectations are impossible”* (Classroom Teacher, LTO).

## Learning is lost

Volatility and violence in classrooms not only undermine the emotional well-being of students (see 5.4) but also inhibit their ability to absorb and retain information. This is exacerbated when classroom evacuations force students out of their learning environment and *“destroys any chance of providing an actual education”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 2-3). For some, evacuations are common occurrences: *“After 101 days of school, I had filled out over 200 incident reports and we had had over 50 evacuations”* (Classroom Teacher, Grade 2-3).

*“Kids are terrified of certain students. Their education is being interrupted when they are being evacuated to safety on a daily basis.”*

– Educational Assistant,  
K-6

## Educational supports are unavailable

*“I’ve worked in a classroom where a sweet little boy with autism didn’t get any support because I was assigned to the violent students.”*

– Educational Assistant,  
Daily Occasional

As we saw in 1.4, educational assistants who once assisted student learning are now being tasked with responding to and managing behaviours. In real terms, this means that students who would benefit, sometimes a great deal, from some remedial resources (e.g., literacy support) are denied this opportunity. One educational assistant (K-4) described how: *“There is not enough qualified staff to meet the needs. Behaviours always trump academics so the kids who just need a little more help aren’t getting it and they’re falling even further behind.”*



## 5.4

# STUDENTS' EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IS UNDERMINED

Exposure to workplace violence against education sector workers impacts students' learning environment (see 5.3) and (relatedly) their emotional well-being. It goes without saying that students' capacity to learn is compromised when they are distressed, anxious, or fearful. One classroom teacher (K-3) suggested that changes in at-home behaviour may be related to witnessing violence:

*Parents are not notified when there is violence in the classroom. In a kindergarten classroom, children are definitely affected by witnessing violence from a peer. They may be bed wetting, not able to fall asleep, changing eating habits, or acting out more at home. Families don't know what's happening in classrooms and therefore, may be wondering why there's a sudden change in their child's behaviour.*

### The impacts of workplace violence on students include...

- 1 **Feeling unsafe:** "Students are concerned for the safety of the [education sector worker] and themselves. They are crying, are wide-eyed, and cover their ears." (Classroom Teacher, Grade 1)
- 2 **Being anxious:** "All children deserve a safe space to learn. That's not happening. Schools aren't safe, kids walk on eggshells hoping they won't say or do the wrong thing to the wrong student, or are forced to watch adults get hurt in their learning circles." (Educational Assistant, K-8)
- 3 **Disliking school:** "Watching students afraid to come to school, stay in class, or even enjoy the day due to the behaviour of a classmate breaks my heart. Students should NOT ever feel scared to come to school and not get the full experience while there." (Educational Assistant, K-4)
- 4 **Imitating behaviours:** "Often students' actions and verbal harassment towards the staff will be heard and seen by other students; it spreads like wildfire causing a lack of respect in the class. Then, more and more students don't listen to staff or follow the rules." (ECE, K-6)
- 5 **Normalizing violence:** "The violence against women in our profession is staggering. We are exposing students to this violence and the lack of response is showing them that it is ok." (Classroom Teacher, Grade 3)
- 6 **Reinforcing fears:** "'We just have to get you in full PPE.' Being fully decked out in protective gear sends the message to other kids in the class that they should be afraid. 'Oh, the grown-up needs to wear all that gear so they don't get hurt, do I need some?'" (Educational Assistant, LTO)
- 7 **Being excluded:** "Some students did not want to have anything to do with the student who was violent and they were traumatized for a long time." (Educational Assistant, K-3)
- 8 **Missing classroom resources:** "Evacuate the classroom is common practice. We're told 'things can be replaced, but people can't.' Except things AREN'T replaced because there's no money. Once stuff is broken (computers, tablets, projectors), it's just gone." (Classroom Teacher, Grade 7)
- 9 **Losing supports:** "We need more support for children in the middle ground. Those that struggle academically, socially, or emotionally, but get passed by for support because the high needs children receive all of the support." (Educational Assistant, K-4)
- 10 **Overstimulating environments:** "The learning of students with complex needs is often disrupted and their special behaviours (stimming, rocking, pacing, etc.) increase as routines are disrupted and they hear/witness violent behaviours from other students." (Special Education Teacher, K-8)

# ***Section 6:*** ***Compounding costs in the age of austerity***

“

*Schools were once places of education... This is becoming less apparent. We are robbing Peter to pay Paul and the rest are left to 'deal with it!' We are no longer serving all children. Kids with learning disabilities have been dropped from the list, and more and more kids with behaviours are not 'bad enough' to require consistent EA support. The system is deeply fractured, and more and more secondary problems are going to arise because of it.*

– Early Childhood Educator, K-6

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## 6.1

# AUSTERITY, UNDERFUNDING & INSTITUTIONAL NEGLECT

As the effects of decades worth of deep austerity-driven cuts and systemic privatization have taken hold, Ontarians are experiencing the erosion of once taken-for-granted services: a family doctor, a safe place for our elders to live out their days, and timely emergency healthcare. Indeed, institutional neglect – the failure to “recognize or respond to eligible demands for care” – surrounds us (Kiely and Warnock, 2023, p. 316). Publicly funded education, though not as visible or as present in the media, has similarly been impacted. In this section, we demonstrate how both workplace violence in Ontario’s publicly funded schools and its escalation are symptoms of the larger issue of insufficient funding. In the following interconnected pages, we: (1) document the scope of funding cuts in the context of increasing needs (i.e., institutional neglect), (2) identify the consequences of those funding cuts and reflect on how they ‘play out’ in schools, and (3) present the cycle of workplace violence to make sense of escalating rates in the context of chronic underfunding and understaffing.

## Decreasing funding

There is ample evidence that, in inflation-adjusted dollars, funding to Ontario schools has decreased:

1. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives: Ontario schools have seen a decrease in inflation-adjusted per-student allocation of 1,500 dollars since 2018 (Tranjan, 2024).
2. Ontario Public School Boards’ Association: Per-pupil funding has declined every year since the pandemic; when adjusted for inflation, that is a shortfall of 776 dollars, per student. This is the lowest level in more than 10 years (OPSBA, 2024).
3. People for Education: Ontario’s 2024-2025 per student funding increased an average of just 1.9 percent; significantly lower than the current rate of inflation (People for Education, 2024).
4. Peel District School Board (PDSB): As a result of 2024-2025 provincial funding cuts, PDSB (2024) eliminated 155 teaching positions, and received 1.2 million dollars less for safety and well-being initiatives and three hundred thousand dollars less for equity and Indigenous education.

## Increasing student needs

While funding has decreased, the need for supports and services has grown. For example:

- Increased moderate and severe mental health difficulties (Boak et al., 2018)
- Impaired social and emotional development due to pandemic measures (Vaillancourt, 2021)
- Delayed educational attainment, the result of pandemic-related school closures (OECD, 2023)
- Heightened socio-economic stressors for families, including housing and food insecurities
- Limited access to community-based healthcare and social services
- Intensified prevalence of electronic devices

## Underfunding in the context of increasing needs = Institutional neglect

“

*I have taught for thirty years. Schools are in trouble. The kids are in trouble. No one is OK. Anxiety, violence, and normal developmental milestones not being met. Parent well-being and ability of families to provide basic needs – it’s all in jeopardy. Two working parents make it hard to spend time with children. Add in the prevalence of technology. These are only some of the factors that clearly contribute to the increase of unhappy kids and, therefore violent students.*

– Classroom Teacher, Grade 5-6

## 6.2

# CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

Given austerity-driven cuts and increased student needs (see 6.1), the question becomes: How does the lack of funding ‘play out’ in Ontario’s publicly funded schools? Here we consider just five of the ways dwindling resources and service cuts create the conditions in which workplace violence occurs.\*

### Large and complex classrooms

- Overstimulated and overcrowded environments
- Diverse learning styles and challenges in one class
- Learning & emotional well-being are compromised

*Means... Students who are distracted, scared, overwhelmed, alienated, struggling academically, and falling through the cracks may well lash out.*

“*I think an increase in staffing, smaller class sizes, and work expectations that reflect appropriate learning levels are necessary. These things will enable staff to address students’ lagging skills more effectively before their frustration levels become out of control.*

– Educational Assistant, K-6

### Inadequate EA allocations

- High student-to-EA ratios
- Limited support for remedial academics
- Reactive measures are relied upon

*Means... Educational assistants’ ability to support individual students, develop relationships, and learn students’ unique needs and triggers is undermined.*

“*Certainly more EAs would go a long way in supporting struggling students, proactively reducing triggers for violent behaviours, having eyes at the back of the classroom, and helping students achieve their educational goals.*

– Educational Assistant, K-8

### Insufficient material resources

- Absence of physical space (e.g., quiet rooms)
- Few sensory devices (e.g., fidget spinner)
- Limited school supplies (e.g., learning materials)

*Means... The tools, material resources, and physical spaces that can help students manage behaviours and self-regulate are not available.*

“*We need items that might help calm a child – these items are often very expensive. I’m thinking of indoor swings, spin boards, sensory bubble tubes. Even smaller items like extra hard chewlery are costly, and often get lost or broken.*

– Special Education Teacher, K-4

### Scarce professional services in schools

- Insufficient mental health professionals
- Limited school-based social services (e.g., CYWs)
- Few health and language professionals (e.g., OTs)

*Means... Students and their families access to crucial supports and services, including those that impart coping and mitigation strategies, is compromised.*

“*Everyone is stretched too thin. Our psychologist works with ten schools. We need a full-time social worker to support students and parents during crises, to help guide them and teach strategies to prevent future occurrences.*

– Clerical Worker, 7-12

### Limited assessments and interventions

- Delayed psycho-educational assessments
- Inaccessibility of healthcare interventions
- Privatization of student services

*Means... Students are denied equal access to assessments for necessary medical devices (e.g., hearing aids) or specialized learning opportunities.*

“*Access to assessments is abysmal. We have to fight for students to be assessed for dyslexia or learning disabilities in grade seven, a critical time in adolescent development. These delays impact a student’s mental health for years.*

– Classroom Teacher, Grade 7-8

\*ETFO’s *Promises Unfulfilled* (2025) provides an in-depth examination of the impact of funding cuts on special education.



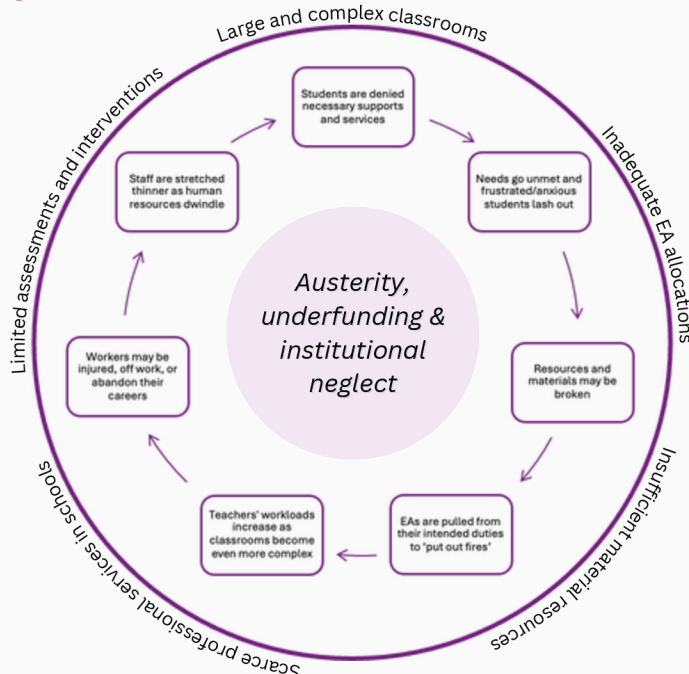
## 6.3

# COMPOUNDING COSTS: THE CYCLE OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

In the previous pages, we have: identified that funding for Ontario's publicly funded education system is declining at the same time as needs are increasing (6.1), and highlighted some of the ways this lack of investment translates into overcrowded classrooms, fewer educational assistants, limited material and physical resources, dwindling professional health and social services, and unequal access to assessments for students (6.2). The link between institutional neglect and student-initiated violence is clear. As one classroom teacher (Grade 5-6) wrote: *"Behaviour is often the result of not having needs met, of anxiety, and of frustration, yet we continue to create environments that are frustrating, anxiety-inducing, and make it impossible to meet students where they are at."*

On this third page, we consider the *escalating* nature of the violence. As we saw in 1.3, already high levels of workplace violence against education sector workers are increasing at alarming rates. In the context of shrinking resources, dwindling supports, and increasing needs, a cycle of workplace violence emerges. Indeed, violence and its responses produce not only the conditions for more violence but also its escalation.

### The cycle of workplace violence



The image above illustrates the compounding nature of workplace violence in schools. Ontario's underfunded education system is truly running on fumes: the lack of proactive interventions and the unwillingness to invest in public education creates compounding effects that exacerbate the very conditions that give rise to increasing levels of workplace violence. This, in addition to the fact that *"education sector workers are leaving the field in droves"* (see 5.2), contributes to daily shortages in Ontario schools — more than a quarter of schools face teacher shortages and nearly half experience EA shortages (People for Education, 2024). In real terms, this means reliance on unqualified staff and already unmanageable workloads increase; leaving students with even less resources and supports. Ultimately, the structural violence of austerity begets interpersonal violence. Education sector workers, students, and in the end, all of us pay the price.



# ***Conclusion:*** ***Parents need*** ***to know!***

“

*The lack of proper support was evident in EVERY single classroom I worked in this year. The system is broken and I support whatever it takes to make schools a safe space for all students and staff. I desperately wish the public and especially parents knew what was going on. Why does a parent not receive a letter to let them know each time their child's class was evacuated? Violence and the lack of supports in education seem like one of the best-kept secrets right now.*

– Occasional Teacher, K-6

# Parents need to know!

As we have seen in this report, schools are not the same as they were even a decade ago. Today's students may well be: witnessing (predominately women) workers experiencing violence daily, evacuating their classrooms regularly, being distressed and fearful at school, struggling to learn in large and complex classes, not receiving the supports they are entitled to, and thinking violence in schools is normal. This normalization is precisely why students may not talk about incidents at home: *"Parents have no idea just how bad it is because their kids think violence in schools is normal. The desensitization of our youngest learners is heartbreaking"* (Educational Assistant, K-3). While confidentiality is obviously an important mechanism to protect both students and educators, in practice, privacy regulations limit educators' ability to inform parents about classroom disruptions. In addition, prohibitions against workers sharing their experiences publicly (e.g., on social media) contribute to workplace violence in Ontario schools remaining the best kept secret.

## ***We leave the last words to education sector workers:***

“Many times, classrooms have to be evacuated, and kids witness horrific acts of violence and continue to be traumatized. They are never offered counselling. There is no debrief by administrators with the affected students. Parents aren't aware of how violent schools have become. They aren't being told what their kids have to tolerate and what has become their new normal.

– Educational Assistant, K-6

“Lack of parent support for teachers is one of the most difficult things for teachers. When we take our personal time to call home, it's because we want to help the students become the best they can be. Too often parents become defensive. We are all on the same team, working to support and educate their children.

– Subject Specialist Teacher, K-6

“It is always unnerving to see my co-workers physically assaulted. It leaves you with a heightened sense of being unsafe and in a constant state of alert. Watching the other students' stress and anxiety is the most difficult part. If this was going on in students' homes and we were made aware, we are legally required to call Children's Aid Society YET they are being exposed to this daily at school!

– Educational Assistant, K-6

“Schools are broken; they are (barely) working because of the dedication and overtime work from staff. Students who just need that little bit of help are seeing violence and harassment daily. Students with Individual Education Plans are NOT getting the extra help their parents are told they are getting.

– Long-Term Occasional Teacher, Grade 2

“Many from the public imply that this is a part of my job. Self-defence, dissipating and breaking up fights, tolerating insults and harassment were never taught in teachers college 20 years ago, and I have never received professional development on this, so how can it be my job?

– Classroom Teacher, 9-12

“I find joy in working with our kids and doing what we are supposed to do; but we're not doing the job the way it was intended. These students aren't learning, aren't getting academic support, aren't getting behavioural supports; they are not getting anything that they are supposed to be getting.

– Educational Assistant, K-6

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