

THE FACTS

An Analysis of the Safe Schools Action Team Report for CUPE Members in Ontario

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Safe Schools Policy and Practice: Recommendations of the Safe Schools Action Team and How They Might Affect CUPE Members Who Work in Ontario School Boards.

On June 26, 2006 the government released a report of the Safe Schools Action Team entitled Safe Schools Policy and Practice: An Agenda for Action. The Action Team, chaired by parliamentary assistant Liz Sandals (former head of the school boards' association OSPBA) held public consultations last fall and this latest report was shaped by those consultations. The government has committed to studying the report and responding by the fall. It is likely that its response will be to substantially amend the Safe Schools Act.

As the backbone of the school system, support staff workers have a strong interest in safe schools, and crucial roles to play in making schools safe. Lunchroom and hallway monitors and school secretaries routinely deal with aggressive students; many educational assistants spend their entire work days with special needs students with violent behavioural tendencies. Custodians are

sometimes called in to break up student fights.

It is notable that the Action Team's report recognizes the importance of involving *all* staff in solutions to school violence and bullying. The report states that: "day to day interaction with students and staff all contribute to creating a secure and welcoming climate that enhances learning." Furthermore, the report explicitly refers to support staff in this regard:

A visible adult presence in schools is also important to enhance students' feeling of safety. This presence may be provided by a wide range of individuals including teachers and principals, support and paraprofessional staff, volunteers, yard duty staff, custodians, lunchtime and hall supervisors.

Recognition of the important contribution of support staff to safe schools has been slow in coming but now that it has been clearly recognized, in this report at least, we cannot let the government or school boards forget or ignore it. We can use this recognition to bolster our arguments against staff cuts or

contracting out. Now that the contribution of support staff to safe schools has been recognized, we can argue that support staff cuts will undermine school safety. We can also make logical connections between safe schools and contracting out—which inevitably leads to more staff turnover than would be the case if the work was done in the bargaining unit. More staff turnover means more new faces in school—fewer familiar faces for students to turn to in violent situations or other emergencies.

Conspicuously absent from that list of support staff who contribute to school safety, of course, are educational assistants, who are the support staff most likely to encounter violence in the workplace on a regular and consistent basis. Unfortunately this document, like just about everything the government has published on safe schools, doesn't substantially address the extremely complicated issue of violence committed by special-needs students, and EAs still do not have a consistent, province-wide comprehensive health & safety framework that covers the issue of violence in their workplace.

This paper does recognize that “accommodations must be made for students with special needs who exhibit behaviors that could endanger themselves or others.” The report recommends that: “individual safety plans should be developed, put in place and regularly monitored to ensure that the plan for each student is appropriate.”

This recommendation is the clearest acknowledgement that we have seen from any group appointed by this government that violence committed by special-needs students is an issue that must be addressed. However, it is suggested by the way it is addressed in this paper, i.e. the reference to behavior that “might endanger themselves or others,” that the effect of violence on staff is a secondary consideration. The paper should have more directly acknowledged that EAs regularly face violent situations in school boards across this province, and it should have explicitly offered recommendations that would have offered solutions. Yes, some students endanger themselves as a result of violent outbursts, but EAs have been bearing the brunt of student violence and nowhere does this paper acknowledge that fact. Nor does the paper address the issue of EAs covering classrooms for teachers (in order that the latter can enjoy their preparation time won last spring). This expansion of responsibilities for EAs has made their workdays potentially more dangerous since they are not just responsible for the students they are assigned to but entire classrooms—which include those special needs students.

In the paper's section on education and training, there is no recommendation on training EAs can receive to help them deal with consistently violent students. Individual safety plans are fine, but beyond that, the paper suggests that all staff receive training in the

“behavioral management of students.” This recommendation is insufficient to deal with the problem of consistently violent students, and it would have been welcome if this paper had suggested training regimes for EAs who face violence on an almost daily basis.

Other subjects covered by this paper do not directly affect CUPE member but are of interest nevertheless. One topic covered is the inconsistency of the application of the Safe Schools Act across the province. Suspension rates vary enormously, and this paper makes recommendations to the government to provide direction and guidance to boards on progressive discipline techniques. Another recommendation is that every board establishes a Safe Schools Advisory Committee that would involve community members and parents.

So, in the final analysis, do we praise or criticize this report? It is encouraging that this government is taking steps to correct flaws with the Safe Schools Act passed by the Harris-Eves governments, which was a somewhat blunt, hardnosed approach to school violence and bullying. It is encouraging also that public consultations were held.

What is less encouraging is the pace of change in this area. Several years ago now we brought to the attention of this government—and the one that preceded it—the issue of violence against EAs but we are still awaiting a comprehensive solution. The ball is clearly in the government’s court on this issue. The government recently passed Bill 78, which gives Cabinet broad powers to make regulations to promote the health and safety of students. It is incumbent on us as the union that represents support staff to make it perfectly clear to this government that when it responds to the recommendations contained in this report, it must clearly address the most pressing safety issue of all, and that is the regular violence that educational assistants face everyday.