

AT THE BREAKING POINT



**VIOLENCE SURVEY OF
SASKATCHEWAN EDUCATION
SUPPORT WORKERS**

NOVEMBER 2019

PREPARED BY CUPE RESEARCH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

- CUPE represents over 7,000 support workers in the pre-kindergarten to Grade 12 (PreK-12) education sector in Saskatchewan.
- 1,026 CUPE education workers from across Saskatchewan participated in a confidential survey regarding workplace violence during the timeframe of March to May 2019.
- 91.9% of respondents are women; 69.8% of survey respondents are education assistants (EAs).

Findings

- The most common forms of violence experienced by education support workers in the last three years are: “yelled or sworn at” (71.2%); “struck with a hand or foot” (47.7%); “scratched” (41.4%); “emotionally abused” (40.4%); “struck with or had an object thrown at me” (40.3%); and “shoved/pushed” (39.6%).
- 10.2% of education support workers report experiencing violent incidents daily, while 15.2% experience violence several times a week, and 14.3% several times a month. Survey respondents who identify as EAs report even more frequent incidents of workplace violence.
- 48.1% of respondents reported some increase or a significant increase in workplace violence in the last three years as opposed to 12.2% who reported a decrease in violence incidents.
- 79.1% of respondents cited students as those who perpetrated the acts of violence in their workplace over the last three years.
- 20.3% of respondents said they have lost time away from work due to workplace violence.
- A majority of respondents are either somewhat concerned about their own personal health and safety in the workplace (41.4%) or significantly concerned (24.9%).
- 57.6% of respondents said they didn’t know if there was a violence prevention program at their workplace, while 63.7% of respondents didn’t know if their workplace has a written policy concerning violence.
- For those respondents who said their workplace did have a written violence policy, only 41.1% said they were provided with training on the policy.
- A majority of respondents (63.9%) said they didn’t know if their workplace offered a program to provide support for employees who are victims of violence. Only 24.8% of respondents reported that their workplace had counselling available for victims of violence, and even less (18.6%) said counselling was available for witnesses of violence.

- Most respondents (62.8%) said they reported violent incident(s) they experienced or witnessed over the last three years to their supervisor. However, 43% of respondents said they brushed off the violent incident(s). Only 28.9% of respondents reported filling out an employee incident report with their employer.
- 28.8% of respondents who didn't report violence said they did not think the injury was that serious, while 22.3% said they did not know they should report the incident, and 9.5% said their supervisor discouraged them from reporting the incident.
- 41.6% of respondents who reported violent incidents said no action was taken as a result compared to 24.2% who said the employer took steps to ensure their health and safety.
- Respondents were asked if their employer shares student safety plans with them. The most common response was "sometimes" (45.8%), followed by "no" (27.8%), "all the time" (16.6%), and "does not apply to my classification" (9.8%).
- Nearly half of respondents (46.3%) said they have heard about the right to refuse unsafe work but are not that familiar with it; 29.1% were not aware of this right; and 24.6% said they were very familiar with this right.
- 90.7% of respondents report that they have never exercised their right to refuse unsafe work. A majority (53.0%) of those who have exercised this right said that their employer complied and took steps to make their work situation safe.

Recommendations

- To reduce the violence our members face, CUPE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan undertake the following initiatives:
 1. Ensure that all school divisions in Saskatchewan develop, promote, and uphold violence prevention policies.
 2. Direct school division employers to provide and expand violence prevention training.
 3. Require mandatory occupational health and safety (OH&S) training for all supervisors and administrators working for school divisions.
 4. Require that occupational health and safety officers conduct a violence audit of all school divisions in Saskatchewan.
 5. Provide regulatory guidance to ensure that all education support staff working with students are made aware of and have access to student safety plans.
 6. Significantly increase operating funding for public and separate school divisions to allow for the hiring of additional EAs. Additional funding is required to provide professional development for EAs who work with intensive needs students.
 7. A letter of commitment from the provincial government that it will work with CUPE, school divisions, the Saskatchewan School Board Association, and other education stakeholders to reduce workplace violence in our schools.

INTRODUCTION

CUPE represents over 7,000 support workers in the pre-kindergarten to grade 12 (PreK-12) education sector in Saskatchewan.

CUPE members work in a variety of jobs in both public and separate schools. These jobs include education assistants, secretaries and administrative assistants, library assistants and technicians, caretakers, maintenance and trades workers, bus drivers, information technologists, social workers, community school coordinators, and speech assistants.

At the 2018 Education Workers' Steering Committee (EWSC) Annual Conference, many members reported on the violence they encounter at work. Although these stories came primarily from education assistants (EAs), other CUPE education workers also report facing violence from students, parents, and members of the public.

As a result of these discussions, a committee was created to work with the CUPE Research Representative in Saskatchewan to develop a provincial survey to measure the extent of workplace violence facing CUPE education support staff.

A confidential online survey was developed and distributed to every CUPE education local on March 21, 2019. Paper copies of the survey were made available to those CUPE locals and members upon request. The survey deadline was May 31, 2019.

In total, 1,026 CUPE members working in the K-12 sector participated in the survey, which represents approximately 15% of our membership in this sector. Forty members opted to complete paper surveys, which are included in the overall total. The survey included 32 questions, most of which were close-ended questions. Towards the end of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to provide an open-ended answer. Many of these responses appear in this report, though some have been edited for brevity, punctuation, spelling, and to protect anonymity.

At the beginning of CUPE's survey, the following definition of violence in the workplace was provided:

Violence in the workplace is any incident(s) in which an employee is threatened, assaulted or abused during the course of their employment that may cause physical or psychological harm. This includes verbal or written threats, attempted or actual assault, application of force, verbal abuse and harassment.

As this report will show, workplace violence is becoming a growing concern for CUPE members who are employed as education support workers, particularly EAs.

Class sizes in Saskatchewan are increasing, as is enrollment in larger urban centres. At the same time, classroom needs are becoming more complex, and supports and resources have decreased in many areas following the implementation of the province's Lean initiative of "finding efficiencies" and the 2017 austerity budget that cut \$54 million from education.

The percentage of students requiring intensive supports in our schools is growing rapidly. These intensive supports greatly assist students with autism, cerebral palsy, mental health diagnoses, and other disabilities. Many students are also struggling with alcohol and drug addictions, gang activity, and poverty.

CUPE members take pride in working with students who require intensive supports. Our union strongly supports an inclusive education system where all students are given the opportunity to learn and develop their full potential.

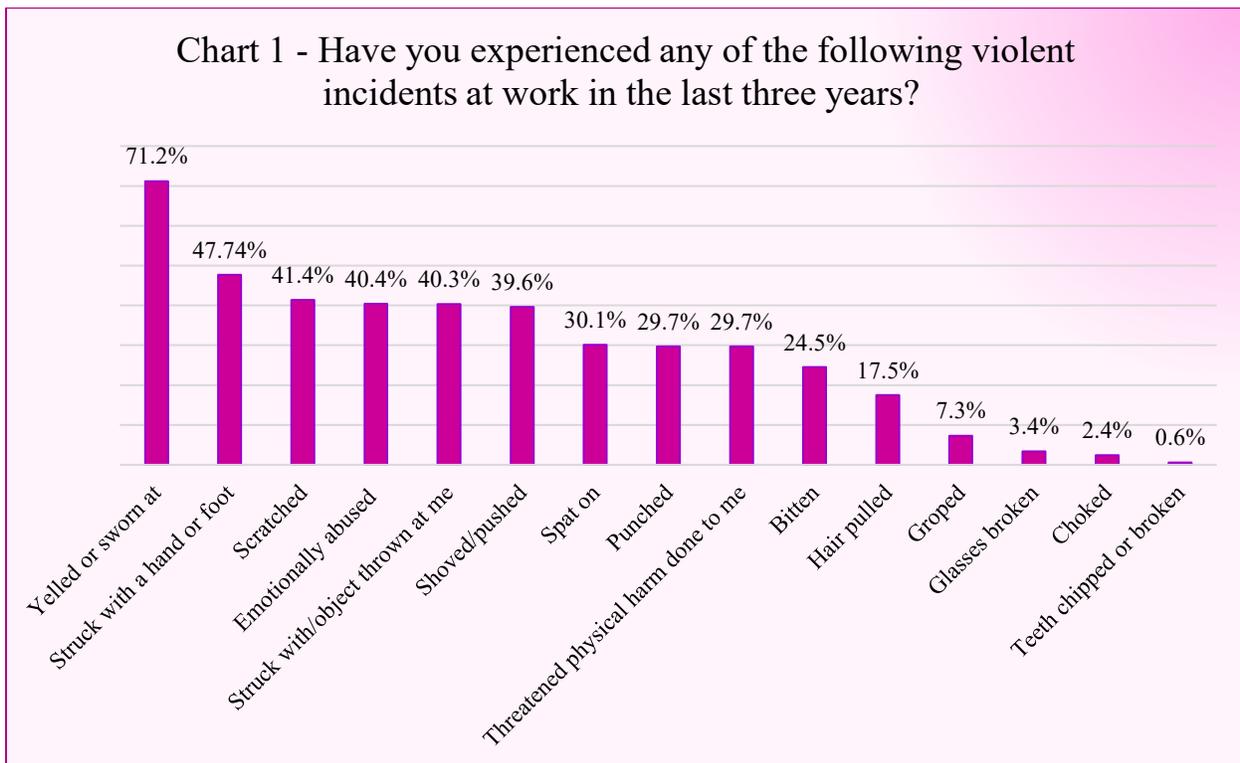
We do not blame students for the violence that our members are increasingly facing. It is the legal requirement of the employer to provide a healthy and safe workplace that is free from violence in all its forms. School division employers, with appropriate funding from the provincial government, must ensure the proper supports and resources, staffing, and plans are in place to help students succeed and ensure the safety of education support workers. Only by better understanding and addressing the root causes of the violence can we more effectively prevent violence in our schools.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- The respondents who participated in the survey work for 12 public school divisions and three separate school divisions. The highest participation rates were from the Regina Public School Division (28.1%), followed by St. Paul's (Greater Saskatoon Catholic) School Division (14.3%) and Saskatoon Public School Division (12.3%).
- Members representing over 25 classifications completed the survey. A majority of the responses (69.8%) were from education assistants or EAs, followed by administrative support, clerical or office positions (12.1%), and caretakers or facility workers (4.6%).
- 92.6% of respondents work in only one classification.
- 91.8% of respondents work in a 10-month (school year) position, while 8.2% work in 12-month (calendar year) position.
- 69.7% of respondents are permanent full-time employees; 14.6% are temporary or yearly contract full-time; 10.5% are permanent part-time; 2.9% are casual employees; and 2.3% are temporary part-time.
- 91.9% of respondents are women.
- 39.6% of respondents are 46 to 65 years old; 35.5% are 36 to 45 years old; 17.3% are 26 to 35 years old; 4.5% are 25 years old or younger; and 3.1% are over 65 years old.
- 27.9% of respondents had worked for their employer for less than five years; 41.2% had worked for their employer for more than five years but less 15 years; and 30.9% had worked for their employer for more than 15 years.
- 6.7% of respondents identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Metis or Inuit), 2.4% as a person of colour, and 2.1% as a person with a disability and 1.0% as LGBTQ2.

WHAT FORMS OF VIOLENCE DO EDUCATION WORKERS EXPERIENCE?

As Chart 1 shows, the most common form of violence education support workers face is being “yelled or sworn at.” Over two-thirds of survey respondents (71.2%) reported that they have experienced this in the last three years. The next most common forms of violence experienced by education workers were “struck with a hand or foot” (47.7%), “scratched” (41.4%), “emotionally abused” (40.4%), “struck with or had an object thrown at me” (40.3%), and “shoved/pushed” (39.6%). High percentages of respondents also reported being “spat on” (30.1%), “punched” and “threatened to have physical harm done to me” (29.7%), and bitten (24.5%).



Survey respondents were also asked if they experienced other violent incidents at work in the last three years beyond those listed above. Here is a sampling of the responses:

- *A lighter lit up in my face;*
- *Death threat;*
- *Threatened to have car blown up;*
- *Had scissors pulled on me;*
- *Chairs thrown at me, shoes thrown at me;*
- *Jumped on;*
- *Feces and urine thrown or directed at me;*
- *Urinated on;*
- *Glasses ripped off face;*
- *Head-butted;*

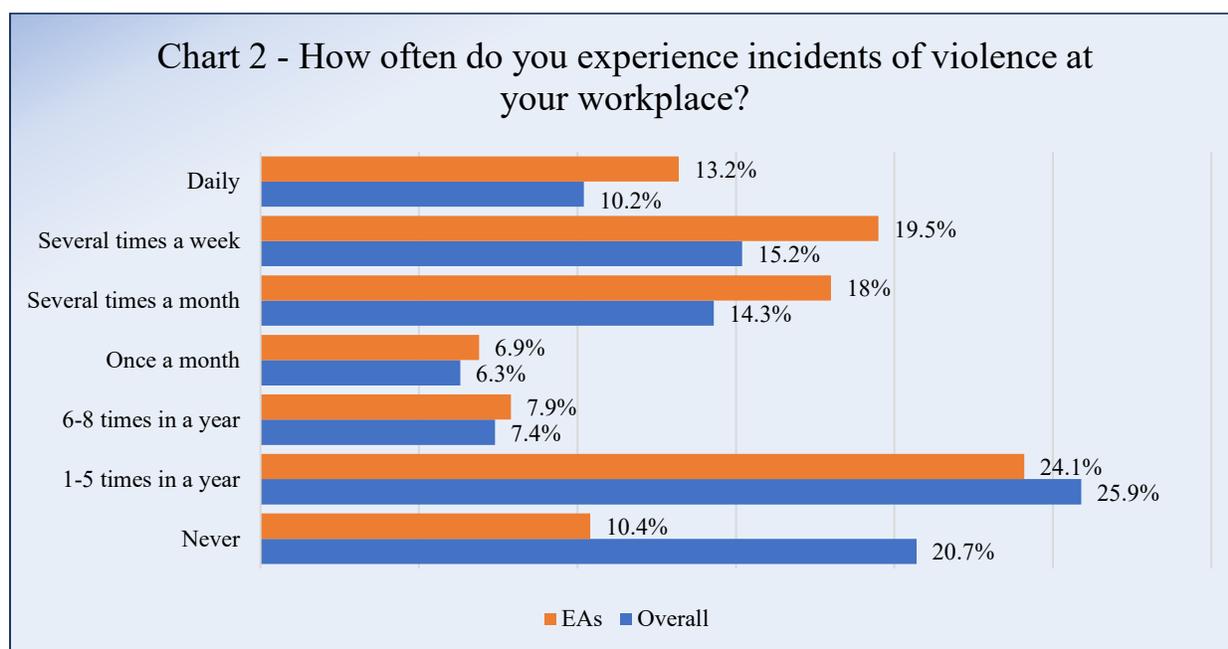
- *Pinched;*
- *Forearms grabbed and bruised;*
- *Stabbed with pencil;*
- *Finger broke;*
- *Racism, [xenophobia], and discrimination;*
- *Sexually harassed;*
- *Unwanted physical contact;*
- *Stalked;*
- *Tacks pushed into my arm; and*
- *Bit by dog on home visit, needed stitches.*

Many survey respondents provided further detail on the kinds of violence they experience. Here are a few examples of these comments:

- *“I work with violent students so slapping, biting, kicking, etc. is the norm for me.”*
- *“I went to my doctor and got her to fill out a medical form stating that I was not in a position to be kicked, hit, punched, pushed, spit at, chased, etc. at work and that was filed with my employer. My doctor was appalled by what I was telling her goes on in my workplace.”*
- *“Verbal abuse is the worst and most frequent occurrence.”*
- *“Our principal here would yell at me from down the hall, always question me no matter what I was doing and berate me in front of students. I have taken days off to get a break from these things. These may not be physical things but have taken a huge toll on me at work and home.”*
- *“I work as an admin assistant in the school office and think signs about verbal abuse, etc. not [being] tolerated should be mandatory in all schools. I have experienced an increase in this behaviour in the last couple of years.”*
- *“[A] student punched me, threw objects at me attempted to throw a metal stool at me. Held keys and push pins between their fingers and held them up by my face and neck and threaten[ed] to stab me if I didn’t open a door for him to have access to another student.”*
- *“Bullying, belittling and intimidation are also forms of violence.”*
- *“After the LaLoche school shooting, I was very concerned about that kind of violence and occasionally still get a pang of concern about that.”*

HOW FREQUENT IS WORKPLACE VIOLENCE?

CUPE’s survey asked respondents how often they experience incidents of violence at their workplaces. For this question, the survey data was also further analyzed to compare the frequency of violent incidents experienced by education assistants (EAs) with support workers as a whole. Chart 2 shows that education support workers are facing high levels of violence, whether on a daily basis (10.2%), several times a week (15.2%), or several times a month (14.3%). Survey respondents who identified as EAs report even more frequent incidents of workplace violence. Chart 2 shows that 13.2% of EAs experience violent incidents daily, while 19.5% and 18% say they experience these incidents several times a week and several times a month, respectively.

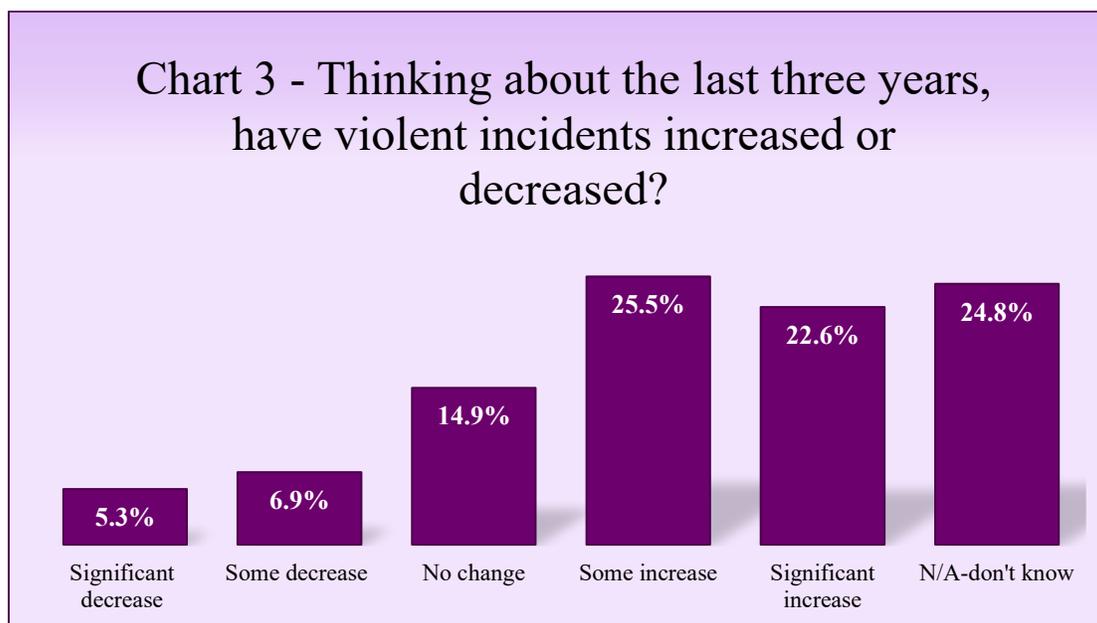


A majority of respondents are either somewhat concerned about their own personal health and safety in the workplace (41.4%) or significantly concerned (24.9%). Less than a third of respondents (33.7%) are not at all concerned about their personal health and safety in the workplace.

Many of the safety concerns are linked to wider societal problems. As one survey respondent remarked:

“Many of the staff at our high school...have expressed their fears of an impending violent incident, where staff and students will potentially be harmed, but our administration continues to ignore our concerns and focus their attention elsewhere. I personally feel completely powerless to create change, as do many of my co-workers, so we put up with it and trudge along. We have lost all control in our school - a school where drugs are smoked in the bathrooms and halls, students are severely impaired by drugs and allowed to sleep it off at school instead of being sent home; and fighting and police visits are a regular occurrence. Our school is a melting pot of circumstances that leave us all very vulnerable to violence and mental health issues.”

As Chart 3 below shows, many education support workers are reporting that violent incidents in their schools are increasing. While many respondents said they didn't know or it wasn't applicable to them, 48.1% of respondents reported some increase or a significant increase in the last three years as opposed to 12.2% who reported some decrease or a significant decrease in violence incidents.



When asked who has perpetrated the acts of violence in their workplace over the last three years, 79.1% of respondents named students. This was followed by parents (15.0%), other employees (9.5%), supervisors (4.3%), and the public (3.5%).

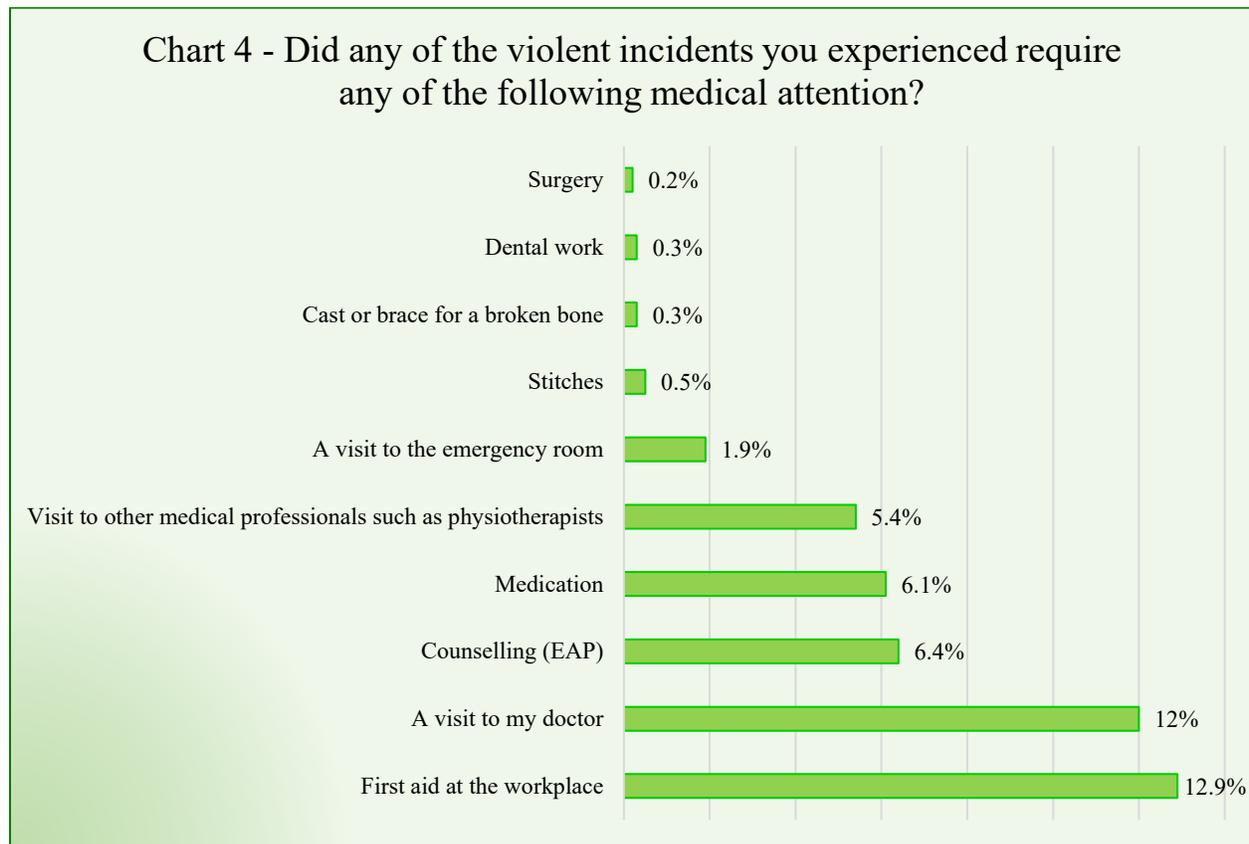
Many survey respondents commented on the increasing levels of violence they face in schools:

- *“Violent behaviour by students seems to be increasing every year. It seems to be becoming the norm, unfortunately.”*
- *“From my experience the problem of violence at work is escalating. As well, there seems to be an increase in the behavioural issues of students, with less support to manage those needs. I've also seen situations where attitudes/behaviour of supervisors are not the most professional but have become personal, petty or misuse of power.”*
- *“I work with a young boy everyday. Almost everyday I either get hit, scratched, bitten, things thrown at me or my hair pulled.”*
- *“In the past years I have been working with an autistic child and some incidents have become more of a common place event. Over the past 5 years the verbal threats and physical encounters were much greater. I am nearing retirement and never had to deal with these situations in my early years.”*

- *“Violence from students is increasing and supervisors and admin act like [it’s] part of the job and it’s happening everywhere.”*
- *“I shouldn’t have to go to work and be physically assaulted on a weekly basis. If things don’t start changing I don’t think I will be doing this job for much longer.”*

VIOLENT INCIDENTS REQUIRING MEDICAL ATTENTION

As Chart 4 shows below, some of the violence experienced by education support staff has required medical attention. Survey respondents cited first aid at the workplace as the most common form of medical attention (12.9%), followed by a visit to the doctor (12%). Other forms of medical attention respondents cited include counselling through employee assistance plans (6.4%), medication (6.1%), and visits to other medical professionals such as physiotherapists (5.4%).



Survey respondents were also asked if the violent incidents at work they experienced required any other medical attention other than those listed above. Here is a sampling of the responses:

- *Anxiety, depression and high blood pressure medication;*
- *Brace/tensor for sprained wrist;*
- *Concussion;*
- *Physio;*
- *Chiropractor;*
- *Optometrist;*
- *Massage therapy;*
- *Muscle relievers (for hurt back);*
- *Tetanus shot;*
- *Ice pack;*
- *Band-Aid/bandages;*

- *Probably should get counselling but never have;*
- *I checked First Aid at the workplace, but it was emotional support that I needed;*
- *Time off from work due to stress, mental health day;*
- *Was able to talk to Principal and counsellor; and*
- *Self-treatment.*

Most respondents (79.7%) say they have never lost time from work due to an incident of violence. Still, a total of 20.3% of respondents reported that they have lost time away from work due to violence, ranging from less than one day (5.3%), to one day (5.6%), to more than one day but less than a week (6.0%), to one week or longer (3.4%).

Many education workers are not only reporting physical injuries, but increased levels of anxiety, stress and even post-traumatic stress disorder. Here are some comments from survey respondents:

- *“The frequency and severity of the physical injuries that I endure at the workplace are increasing. I am an older EA and am not sure that an elementary school is a safe place to work any more.”*
- *“I find the mental damage this is doing to employees is huge. Most of it is going undetected because some just say they are ok when they are being broken down day by day. Even when it's a "good" day, the stress of waiting for the meltdown to happen is exhausting.”*
- *“It's nerve wracking knowing you're going to work every day to be abused physically and mentally, and to be the shield for the other kids in the class. It has caused me anxiety.”*
- *“I have a lot of stress that leads to medical health problems because of the chance of being placed with the students that are violent. When I do get placed with them for bits of time I am usually sick the next day or two after.”*
- *“I have been off for 5 weeks now because of the violence I deal with daily at school. It was mentally too much, and I needed to take a stress leave. I have lost pay because of this.”*
- *“My doctor diagnosed me with PTSD symptoms.”*
- *“I have not had violence in my job in the last three years, but I did have regular and significant violence (choking, hitting, being thrown to the floor) for several years prior to that.”*
- *“Violence is only a part of the hazard. There is a risk of infection and disease from feces, urine (bodily fluid). Vulnerability to being alone with children showering and toileting. These conditions have a very negative and harmful effect not only on staff but children.”*

SUPPORTS AND COUNSELLING

Respondents were also asked if their workplace offered a program to provide support for employees who are victims of violence. A majority of respondents (63.9%) said they didn't know, 19.8% answered "no," and 16.3% answered "yes."

In addition, respondents were asked specifically about access to counselling for victims and witnesses of violence. Only 24.8% of respondents reported that their workplace had counselling available for victims of violence, and even less (18.6%) said counselling was available for witnesses of violence.

Many survey respondents commented on the lack of support available to victims and witnesses of violence. Here are a couple of examples:

- *"Our EFAP is lacking in services...to be blunt. No specialized treatment. No support from our employers."*
- *"We were told at our last EA meeting that when we are "burnt out" there's a number we can call for help. I responded that I don't want to get to that point. Let's deal with issues before they get that far."*

KNOWLEDGE OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE POLICIES

In accordance with Section 3-21(1) of *The Saskatchewan Employment Act*, prescribed workplaces where “violent situations have occurred or may reasonably be expected to occur shall develop and implement a written policy statement and prevention plan to deal with potentially violent situations.” School divisions are not exempt for this requirement.

Nevertheless, CUPE’s Violence in the Workplace Survey shows that most respondents to the survey either don’t know if their workplace has such policies or say they don’t exist.

Specifically, 57.6% of respondents said they didn’t know if there was a violence prevention program at their workplace, while 20.5% reported that there wasn’t a program. Only 21.9% of respondents said there was a violence prevention program at their workplace.

Similarly, 63.7% of respondents didn’t know if their workplace has a written policy concerning violence; 11.0% said a written policy didn’t exist; and 25.4% reported that their workplace did have a policy.

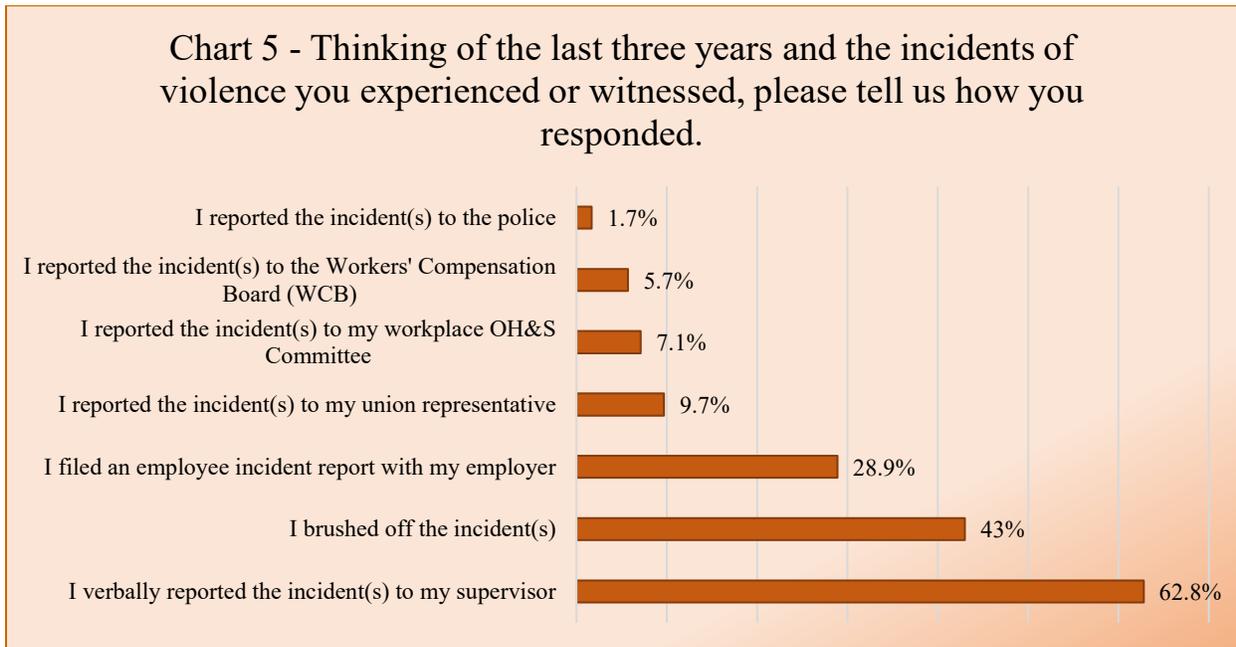
For those respondents who said their workplace did have a written violence policy, only 41.1% said they were provided with training on the policy, while 58.9% said they received no training.

A number of survey respondents expressed concerns with the lack of training they have received. Here is a sample of these comments:

- *“We had short training in self defense seven years ago and have been told not to use it unless absolutely necessary. Up-to-date training and training on how we can defend ourselves would be very helpful.”*
- *“EA’s need more support and training. They take a lot of abuse from students and it wears them down and have to take more sick time in order to recover.”*
- *“There has been no staff training in regards to violence in the workplace. Students can get violent and it is just considered the nature of some of our students. We have no tools to manage these situations.”*
- *“More training [is] needed in restraining out of control students.”*
- *“Yes, we have taken training to protect ourselves but sometimes it [is] hard when you’re close to that student and for no reason he reaches out and grabs you. I feel we are on guard all day because we don’t want to be hurt by these students.”*

REPORTING VIOLENCE

Survey respondents were asked a series of questions about how they responded to violent incidents they experienced or witnessed over the last three years. As Chart 5 shows below, most respondents (62.8%) said they reported the incident(s) to their supervisor. However, 43% said they brushed off the violent incident(s). Only 28.9% of respondents reported filling out an employee incident report with their employer.



The survey also asked respondents who experienced or witnessed workplace violence a number of questions about why they didn't report the incident. As Chart 6 shows, 28.8% said they did not think the injury was that serious, while 22.3% said they did not know they should report the incident, and 9.5% said their supervisor discouraged them from reporting the incident.



Respondents also had the opportunity to list other reasons for not reporting incidents of workplace violence. Here is a sample of the responses received:

- *“Didn't have time that day to do a report.”*
- *“Fear of retaliation from student/parents; lack of support/action from admin.”*
- *“Reported incidents are not handled....feel sometimes it is not worth the time.”*
- *“The incidents are very commonplace and seem to be part of the job, although I know they shouldn't be.”*
- *“It happens regularly. Big incidents I file.”*
- *“Feel that my supervisors brush off incidents because they happen frequently to staff. I didn't know that staff could do anything about the incidents or abuse.”*
- *“My supervisors did not tell me to report it and they are in authority over me.”*
- *“Was handled by teachers & administration.”*
- *“Others reported.”*
- *“Assumed administrative would deal with it.”*
- *“Spoke to the student myself.”*
- *“The online incident reports are only available through teacher login program.”*
- *“I did not think I could report about other employees.”*
- *“No idea such a report existed.”*
- *“I am an immigrant and I get discrimination or bullying even sometimes. I try to be quiet and get along with everyone.”*

The survey also asked respondents what happened if they did report an incident of workplace violence. Here are the responses:

- 41.6% said no action was taken as a result.
- 24.2% said the employer took steps to ensure their health and safety.
- 9.4% said an investigation was launched.
- 8.4% said their union representative followed up with them.

Sixteen percent of respondents reported that actions other than those listed were taken. These included examples where the principal or teacher talked with student, the student was disciplined or suspended, and meetings were held.

A large number of survey respondents took the opportunity to comment further about the process for reporting violence at their workplace. Many expressed frustration, resignation, and cynicism. It is obvious from the numbers above and from the comments below that far too many school divisions and supervisors are not properly dealing with reports of violent incidents in accordance with their legal responsibilities.

- *“Concerns are not taken seriously, and incident reports are not filled out.”*
- *“There was an incident and forms were filled out and [the] supervisor called me in and ripped them up "we don't need these cause no one got hurt" after a student threw a whole boot room of boots at me and then hit a staff member directly in the face.”*

- *“My employer has made accessing the reporting documents very difficult. We must ask our administrator for an incident report to be filed. With my most recent incident, I verbally reported to my administrator, and requested an incident report be filed, as well as following up in writing by email. No report was filed to my knowledge.”*
- *“I feel like the stigma of filing a report is so bad that most people don't do it because of the plain fear of [judgment] passed down by other co-workers.”*
- *“Reports are more child-focused, how to maintain child in class no matter what, despite repeated incidences with same student, so feel discouraged to report unless unusually severe incident that stands out from every day normal abuse experienced from students as part of daily work.”*
- *“The Principal has said we can report it if we want to. Has never encouraged us to report it.”*
- *“I have been hit, kicked, pushed and screamed at over 20 times this school year I have reported it to my administration at the school and it has been documented in a journal but they don't seem to think that it is a big enough deal to fill out an incident report as the student doesn't have much force and doesn't leave a mark. The only time incident reports have been filed is when it is directed towards another student.”*
- *“It is brushed off by administrators. I have been discouraged from filling out incident reports. My administrator joked that I was just being a big complainer.”*
- *“I had to resend incident reports a couple years ago because my (at the time) superior buried some of the reports. Nobody else listened when we told what we were going through. I sent all reports to OH&S and then!! everyone started listening. Action was finally taken and students were removed to proper classrooms.”*
- *“I feel that in most cases there is no use in going to the supervisors about these incidents because the plans that are set in place are not followed through on.”*
- *“Repeatedly I reported it to my supervisor and the Principal, and nothing was done. Was just told to not take it personally!!! Wasn't until my Dr. took me off work, and I reported to WCB that anything was done. And then it was the bare minimum.”*
- *“I didn't realize that we were to file a complaint every time this happened to us. When I did find out, I mentioned it to my teacher and principal and they both kinda sloughed it off and said, “Well then you will be filing everyday.”*
- *“I did have to seek outside medical attention once, as a punch from a student flared a back injury I had previously. I attempted to report it to my resource teacher but it was brushed off and when I asked if I needed to fill anything out because I was hurt at work, I was basically told that no one knew what I needed to do and since it wasn't permanent, report was unnecessary anyway.”*

SHARING OF SAFETY PLANS AND COMMUNICATION

Respondents were asked if their employer shares student safety plans with them. The most common response was “sometimes” (45.8%), followed by “no” (27.8%), “all the time” (16.6%), and “does not apply to my classification” (9.8%).

Of those respondents who answered “no” to this question, 62.2% agreed that having access to student safety plans would make their workplaces safer, while 29.5% didn’t know, and 8.3% disagreed.

Several survey respondents took the opportunity to comment further on safety plans and communication in open-ended responses:

- *“I am aware that when RCMP are called in there is a report supposedly for school safety that is to be shared with all staff. As an educational assistant this has not been shared. We are discouraged from attending staff meetings and when we do, are asked to leave when specific student concerns are raised.”*
- *“Working as a substitute educational assistant, I often enter into unknown situations. It is rare that any background or successful strategies are shared before interaction with potentially violent students occurs. The possible consequences are very real.”*
- *“I don't feel we are informed or given enough, if any, information on the high-risk children we work with directly or come into contact with. I understand FOIP, and confidentiality, but feel it is imperative to know a high-risk child's background. I feel it would help us in knowing what to expect.”*
- *“In my opinion this whole program should be discussed with all staff and supervisor present so that everyone knows about their rights and at the same time they know what would be the consequences for not following up with the rules.”*
- *“I think there needs to be more communication and support for those of us who are working with students who are aggressive.”*
- *“Too many mental health and undiagnosed kids with no safety/behaviour plans that members and all staff/teachers are not equipped for. Not enough supports and admin downtown out of touch completely with classroom needs!”*
- *“I strongly feel like the staff in this program need more protection/support, and need plans that are effective and consistent for our safety and mental health.”*
- *“It would be nice, if at the beginning of the school year we would have a meeting to discuss our rights that we have.”*

- *“During a meeting with the principal, the parent and two teachers, the [high school] student said he wanted to come back and kill somebody. This same student brought a large knife to school last year. The plan that was made after this meeting was that the student would be searched each day on his way into the school. I then will be working with him in a Food Studies lab where there is access to large, sharp butcher knives. None of this was discussed with me! I received all this information from a teacher that was in the meeting. I feel that the admin has kept me in the dark on this matter!”*

RIGHT TO REFUSE UNSAFE WORK

Under *The Saskatchewan Employment Act*, workers have the right to refuse to perform work that they believe is unsafe. This legal right is spelled out in Section 3-31 of the act as follows:

Right to refuse dangerous work

A worker may refuse to perform any particular act or series of acts at a place of employment if the worker has reasonable grounds to believe that the act or series of acts is unusually dangerous to the worker's health or safety or the health or safety of any other person at the place of employment until:

- (a) sufficient steps have been taken to satisfy the worker otherwise; or
- (b) the occupational health committee has investigated the matter and advised the worker otherwise.

CUPE's survey of education support workers asked respondents how familiar they were with the right to refuse unsafe work. Nearly half of respondents (46.3%) said they have heard about it but are not that familiar with the right, 29.1% were not aware of this right, and 24.6% said they were very familiar with the right to refuse.

When asked if they have ever exercised their right to refuse unsafe work, the overwhelming answer from respondents (90.7%) was "no." The 9.3% of respondents who said they have exercised their right to refuse unsafe work were asked what happened as a result. A majority (53%) said that their employer complied and took steps to make their work situation safe, over double the amount who reported that their employer did not comply and asked them to continue doing the unsafe work (20.5%).

In the survey, a number of education assistants expressed feeling torn between invoking their right to refuse unsafe work and their commitment to work with high-needs students. Some expressed concerns that such an approach would only be a temporary fix.

- *"When the violence comes from students, it puts staff (particularly EA's that work individually with them) in a very tricky situation. If the admin doesn't take the situation seriously and stop the child from being allowed at school if they are violent, then you are forced to return to work with someone who you can't just leave, because you're in charge of their well-being."*
- *"Once I walked out of work and refused to come back, the employer took me more seriously. I am now with a different student, however, it is another student with aggression and documented violent [behaviour]."*
- *"No one ever thought we could refuse an assignment and keep your job. I am still not sure if that would be the outcome today."*

- *“I once refused to work with a student because I was having anxiety ... because the student was having a rough day already and was being violent. The week before this student beat me with a broom and sent me to emergency room. When I approached my principal and said I cannot work with the student my principal said if I cannot work with these kinds of students she would talk to the superintendent and transfer me to another school.”*

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Near the end of CUPE's Violence in the Workplace Survey, respondents were asked "Do you have anything else you would like us to know about your experience with violence at work?" Over one-quarter of respondents (288) took the opportunity to provide examples of the workplace violence they have experienced or witnessed, their perspectives on how processes work (or don't work) for reporting violence, ideas to lessen the incidents of violence, and many other related issues.

Many of these comments have appeared throughout this report. Certainly, some survey respondents noted that they currently do not experience violence in their workplace. Others noted that their employer takes workplace violence seriously and acts on incident reports. However, many more commented that workplace violence now seems to be the norm in Saskatchewan schools or is seen to be "just part of the job."

Many survey respondents also noted the increasing proportion of high-needs students in the school system or those requiring intensive supports students with autism, cerebral palsy, mental health diagnoses, and those dealing with drug addictions, gang activity, and poverty. It was noted that in some cases, these students may have little control of their actions. Many observed that the increasing complexity of student behaviours not only present challenges for EAs, but for other students and teachers.

Below is a sample of these additional comments, grouped by theme:

Workplace violence is the norm

- *"When I started in the program incidents of violence happened from the start, and continued to increase to date. I felt like it was "normal" occurrences since it happened so often, and no action or plans ever happened or stayed consistent. And that it was part of my job to deal with it."*
- *"It's just expected we deal with it, as it's the new norm. There are no consequences for the abuse of the support staff. And [I] work alone in a room with these students all day."*
- *"The classrooms are full with such diversity and EAs are expected to work with several students but are almost always chasing after one and the others are left to their own. Often no support from the parents and guardians. Often you get hit several times a day and by the end of the day you know nothing will change... so why report it? Unfortunately, it is now normal to be hit, sworn at, duck out of the way.... just a "normal" day."*

Just "part of the job"

- *"I always report violence in the workplace when it involves students but if it is directed at me I feel it is "part of the job" even though it is not, and should not be tolerated! It's just that usually nothing is done about it."*

- *“I have experienced an unbelievable amount of violence from students in two different settings. It was always portrayed as just part of the job. I have left both of those positions because not only physically but emotionally I could no longer endure it. I believed that if we didn't tolerate this abuse for the students' sake, then there would be no education for them.”*
- *“It seems it has become a part of our job duties to deal with violence at the workplace and are constantly asked to put ourselves in unsafe positions with no backup plan for the potential disastrous outcomes.”*
- *“I feel it is made to be not that big of deal. People say, “Well it was only a kid that hit or bit or kick you, how bad could it be?”*
- *“In order to keep my job, I have to bear all the abuses thinking it could be worse.”*
- *“We are expected to suck it up and deal with any sort of verbal abuse from students and parents and only if there is very significant violence is anything properly dealt with.”*
- *“I go to work in fear that I will be put with one of the several students that are violent in our school. I have communicated in the past that because of the anxiety from these work situations I am having health problems, however, at times I am still put to work with these students being told they don't have any other choice.”*

Percentage of high needs students increasing

- *“I find the violence has been increasing in schools with a higher percentage of students that have higher needs emotionally as well as mentally. With so many students in one school/classroom/area the harder it is to maintain [behaviours] and violent actions.”*
- *“The majority of the violence occurring at work has come from working with either special needs students, students with autism, and students dealing with severe issues of street life, gang life, addictions and poverty, where their needs are not being met at home.”*
- *“I knew that some violence would be a part of the job as some children just don't know how to express themselves. It is not that they want to hurt me, they just do what they know.”*
- *“I have been a victim of violence and have been a witness of violence in the workplace. I would estimate that about 99 percent of the time we have been told it is symptomatic of the child's diagnosis and there's nothing to be done about. It's our job to deal with it.”*
- *“As autistic children reach puberty aggression increases - students in middle years/high school have a fair amount of strength especially when escalated or in the flight or fight mode. Being a female employee of average build, I do not have the strength to manhandle a student that a male would have. It is also very difficult to protect oneself especially when working alone with the student as sometimes these outbursts/attacks occur without warning. Due to the circumstance, calling for backup or help is not an option.”*

- *“I work in a program providing support to students with aggressive behaviour. I go into work every day knowing that someone might try to hurt me.”*
- *“The student I work with is violent; his first response is to bite or scratch, or throw things. This happens daily. He has cerebral palsy, is non-verbal, and has an intellectual disability, so there is some debate as to how in control of his actions he is. Regardless, he perpetrates many violent incidents daily, and we are at a loss as to how to deal with them (supervisors and staff), particularly as his family is in a difficult situation and not able to be responsive should we want to send him home.”*
- *“We work with students with various abilities. Sometimes it is unpredictable. But we deal with it the best that we can.”*
- *“I feel that many students are placed in the wrong program and the frustration caused by the wrong placement causes violence.”*
- *“More and more students are integrated into mainstream when they simply do not have the capabilities to cope and thus act out. It is stressful and frustrating to work in that environment every day. It is often very isolating too because the teacher wants those students out of their classroom. So it is you and the student all alone trying to find something to do somewhere in the school.”*

Impact on other students

- *“When a student spat in my face, she was sent home and I stayed at work. The next day she was back and displaying violent and aggressive behaviour again. The other students are affected negatively by the violence that they experience/witness, sometimes on a daily basis.”*
- *“We were expected to work with a physically violent student. He was eventually put into a program, in which they wore protective gear from his violence but we were never given that as an option. We were just expected to make sure he didn’t hurt other students, himself or us. It was awful, lots of bruises and scratches for myself and other students.”*
- *“I am constantly dealing with a child that has bad aggressive behaviour and is sexually aggressive. His parents say he’s on his medication but we have no way of actually proving he is having it except for his behaviour he shows at school. He head-butts, throws everything, scratches, screams one minute the next he wants to sexually touch you or other students. I am unsure what makes him tick or bring on this behaviour. I find it unsafe for fellow students and for the staff to be one on one with him; he needs two to one most days.”*

More support and EAs required

- *I feel with behaviour students there should always be two people because you need added support, because you’re putting your staff at risk. It’s hard to call the office when a student is throwing things at you and sometimes you’re not close to a phone.*

- *EAs that are front line with low functioning students need more support and coverage than others with students that are more able to function in school activity on a daily basis... Individual plans need to be implemented on per student history.*

Low pay makes violence even more degrading

- *EA's make \$1,400.00 /month after taxes...It makes the violence even more degrading. The self worth I feel and see from other support staff members is low.*
- *Stress of this job and responsibilities are getting too demanding especially for what we are getting paid.*
- *The interesting thing is that the most violent are removed from the "professionals" and placed in isolation with the lowest paid members of staff. [Behaviour] plans appear to be written by individuals that have not spent a lot of time with the student but yet make the important decisions.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

As this report demonstrates, education workers in Saskatchewan are facing increasing levels of violence in their workplaces. Many are experiencing or witnessing violent incidents on a weekly or even daily basis. It's clear that the ongoing exposure to this violence is taking its toll on CUPE members, both physically and mentally. Regrettably, it appears that many school division employers are not upholding their legal responsibilities to maintain safe workplaces. In some cases, supervisors and administrators are discouraging the filing of violent incident reports.

This situation is unacceptable.

To reduce the violence our members face, CUPE recommends that the Government of Saskatchewan undertake the following initiatives:

- **Ensure that all school divisions in Saskatchewan develop, promote, and uphold violence prevention policies.** It is apparent from this survey that most education support workers are unclear if their employer has these policies in place, which is a legal requirement.
- **Direct school division employers to provide and expand violence prevention training.** This should include three hours of union-led training on basic occupational health and safety rights (the right to know, the right to participate, the right to refuse and the right to no reprisal) for every education worker during regular working hours.
- **Require mandatory OH&S training for all supervisors and administrators working for school divisions.** This survey revealed that an alarming number of supervisors are ignoring violent incident reports and discouraging the submission of such reports.
- **Require that occupational health and safety officers conduct a violence audit of all school divisions in Saskatchewan** to (1) ensure compliance with Occupational Health and Safety provisions of *The Saskatchewan Employment Act* and the *Occupational Health & Safety Regulations, 1996*; (2) to determine where non-compliance exists (such as an absence of functioning OH&S Committees, untrained committee members) and to precisely determine the extent of workplace violence occurring in these workplaces.
- **Provide regulatory guidance to ensure that all education support staff working with students are made aware of and have access to student safety plans.** This is consistent with the legal concept of the right to know and the employer's obligation to provide workers with information regarding hazards that workers may encounter.
- **Significantly increase operating funding for public and separate school divisions** to allow for the hiring of additional education assistants to enhance intensive supports for high-needs students, better education outcomes and safer ratios of staffing. Additional funding is required to provide professional development for EAs who work with intensive needs students.
- **A letter of commitment from the provincial government** that it will work with CUPE, school divisions, the Saskatchewan School Board Association and other education stakeholders to reduce workplace violence in our schools.

