

Safe Staff, Safe Schools

A worker-led review of
violence in Nova Scotia's
public schools

Nova Scotia School Board Council of Unions
Canadian Union of Public Employees Nova Scotia



INTRODUCTION

In the 20+ years I have worked in Nova Scotia's public schools, I have personally witnessed a steady rise in incidents of violence in the workplace. At the same time, I have seen my coworkers struggle more and more with every school year, because of growing class sizes, staffing shortages, added responsibilities, and decreasing oversight and support in schools. What hasn't risen steadily is our wages, and so many of us finish a long-overloaded workday, only to head to a second or third job.

Don't get me wrong: We love our jobs. Many school support staff have worked and studied for years to fulfil a lifelong dream of being an educator or contributing to a healthy learning environment. That's why it's so discouraging to see those same folks be forced to sacrifice their physical and mental wellbeing, day in and day out, with little support from our employer.

And when it comes to violence in public schools, well, it's school support staff that are on the receiving end of most of these incidents.

That's why we raised the issue of workplace violence with our union. We've been trying to sound the alarm on this issue for years now and unfortunately, have had little engagement from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD). But they won't be able to ignore the issue of violence in schools for much longer.

As the last school year wrapped up, the office of the Auditor General of Nova Scotia released a report echoing our concerns, as well as affirming the message we have been trying to convey to the EECD.

With another school year on the horizon, we wanted to show Nova Scotians what we deal with in our workplace—in public schools—every day. We want to share what we know with the parents whose kids we work with every day, and the communities we serve. As you read this report, ask yourself: How many fields normalize daily workplace violence? How many fields accept tens of thousands of violent incidents per year involving, and in front of young children?

This is about workplace safety for 5,000 school support staff across Nova Scotia, about a safe learning environment for kids, and about the state of public education in this province.

In the meantime, we'll be on the frontlines. We'll be dealing with the violent incidents, and we'll be cleaning up the messes—until we can get the provincial government to finally act.

With my thanks for your attention and support,
And in solidarity,

Nelson Scott
President, Local 5050 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees
Chair, Nova Scotia School Board Council of Unions



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KEY FACTS

- In the past seven years, violent incidents have increased from 17,000 violent incidents in the 2016-17 school year to 27,000 in 2022-23—a 60% increase in daily violence
- 43% of CUPE school support staff said they do not feel their employer does enough to prevent violence in the workplace
- 50% said when they reported violent incidents, they received no response
- 65 per cent of school support staff said that they witnessed or experienced violence in schools on a weekly basis, 31% experience violence daily
- At the South Shore Regional Centre for Education, 81% of violent incidents were reported were by school support staff
- At the Halifax Regional Centre for Education, over 600 incidents were reported from September 2023 to March 2024 and almost 70% were from school support staff
- Before COVID-19, Teaching Assistants in Halifax were provided with Non-Violent Crisis Intervention training. Now, training is reserved for only those TAs that are deemed to be at the highest risk of violence. Among our members, 52% of TAs report daily violence

HEAR FROM SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF

"Workplace Violence is traumatizing for those who experience it directly (support staff), but also those students who witness it happening to staff or classmates. There is no debriefing happening in the classroom after such incidents. To students who witness violence at school without debriefing, desensitization and an [attitude] that this is not a 'big deal' and is acceptable, is occurring."

"[Violence] has become way too common and accepted in the workplace. It takes a toll on your mental and physical [health]."

"I have to work so many different jobs; I am working all the time. My health can't keep up."

"I have been dealing with [violence] every day to the point I had to take time off work. Been back to work for a week and no recommendations [from my doctor] have been followed."

"What is the sense of filling out all our paperwork when nothing is ever done about it. School admins say it's part of the job. I did not sign up to be beaten every day. This year I have had to wear shin guards, arm guards, the jacket, gloves to work with a student. That should never be the case. I have filled out about 30 forms myself. It is not OK."

"I have a plan to live in a tent behind our school next winter because I can't afford rent anymore."

"Nothing is ever being done to help us. Reports are filled out, but nothing has changed. We are told, it is part of our jobs, but it is not, and we do not get paid very much especially to account for that."

cupe.ca/safe-schools

HOW BIG IS THIS ISSUE?

Violence in schools is an issue affecting all seven Regional Centres for Education (RCEs) and the Francophone school board: the Straight Regional Centre for Education, Tri-County Regional Centre for Education, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial, Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education, Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education, South Shore Regional Centre for Education, Halifax Regional Centre for Education, and Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education.

For the 2022-2023 academic year the following amounts of incidents were reported at each of the RCEs and CSAP¹:

Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE)	14,456
Chignecto-Central Regional Centre for Education (CCRCE)	3,157
Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education (AVRCE)	2,557
Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education (CBVRCE)	2,542
Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP)	1,907
South Shore Regional Centre for Education (SSRCE)	1,124
Straight Regional Centre for Education (SRCE)	923
Tri-County Regional Centre for Education (TRCE)	820

However, this issue affects school support staff the most. The Canadian Union of Public Employees represents 5,000 workers in public schools across Nova Scotia. These workers are Teaching Assistants, Custodians, Bus Drivers, Early Childhood Educators, Librarians, Secretaries, Community Outreach Workers, Accounting Clerks, Computer Technicians, Cafeteria workers, Mechanics, and many more roles essential to our schools.

From September 2023 to March 2024, over 600 incidents were reported at the Halifax Regional Centre for Education², and while that many incidents in a six-month period alone are cause for alarm, it's of particular note that almost 70 per cent of these reports were from CUPE school support staff³.

According to survey, 65 per cent of school support staff said that they witnessed or experienced violence in schools on a weekly basis. And 31 per cent said they witness or experience violence every single day⁴.

"[Violence] has become way too common and accepted in the workplace. It takes a toll on your mental and physical [health]."

For some job classifications, these rates are much higher. Among Teaching Assistants for example, 52 per cent report experiencing violent incidents on a daily basis.

"I have been in rooms where things have been thrown in anger. I have had to block hits from one student to another in which the victim is wheelchair bound and unaware of the occurrence. I have watched coworkers be bitten, scratched, and yelled at. I have heard racial slurs be shouted at coworkers. We continue as we know these children need us and helping them is our passion, but I feel we are under paid. This kind of role is one where you need to go home and unwind not go to a second job afterwards."

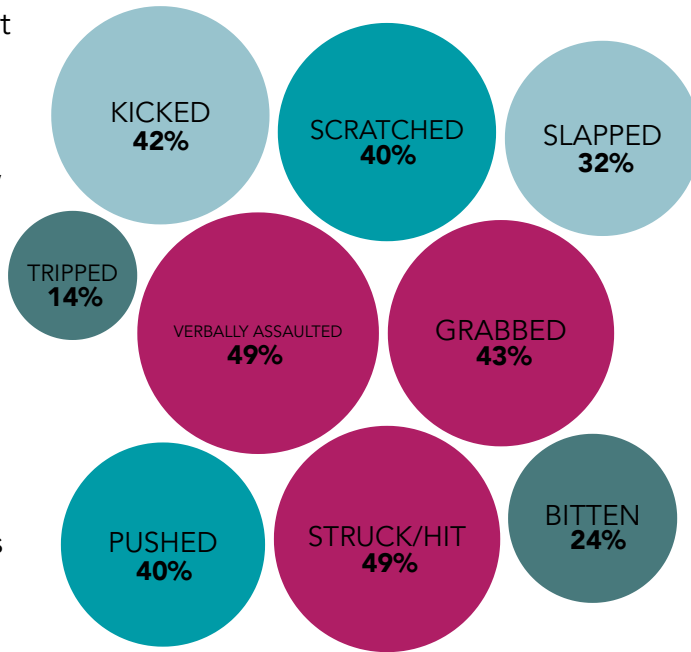
In the 2023-2024 school year, 213 violent incidents were reported at the South Shore Regional Centre for Education⁵. Of these, 81 per cent (173 incidents) were reported by school support staff. But 162—76 per cent—were reported by Teaching Assistants.

Generally, almost half of school support staff have reported experiencing violent incidents, at least occasionally⁶. Examples of these violent incidents include being struck, tripped, grabbed, bitten, or verbally assaulted.

It is also important to note that a huge majority of school support staff, especially in certain roles—Teaching Assistants and Early Childhood Educators, for example—are women. Of the 5,000 CUPE members working in schools, 83 per cent are women⁷.

We are talking about tens of thousands of violent incidents experienced by thousands of women.

The demographics demand the issue of violence in schools also be addressed as an equity issue.



SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF WHO HAVE REPORTED EXPERIENCING EACH TYPE OF INCIDENT "ALL THE TIME," "FREQUENTLY," AND "SOMETIMES"

83% of CUPE school support staff are women

Whether or not school support staff are experiencing violent incidents in a way that specifically impacts equity-seeking groups, is an area we are lacking data on. The current reporting mechanisms do not track demographic data, or related trends, that would be essential in assessing the best way to keep both staff and students from safe generally, and from an equity lens.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

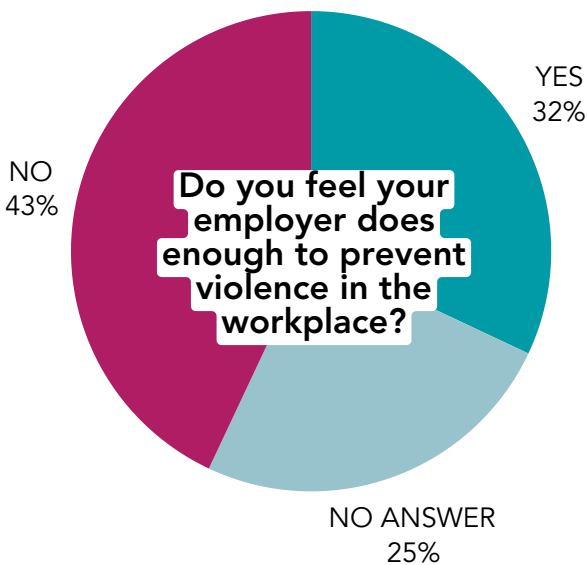
According to workers on the front lines, the current crisis of violence in public schools can be best explained, understood, and addressed, by considering the following factors.

① Significant rise in school violence

In the past seven years, there has been a 60 per cent increase in incidents of violence by students in Nova Scotia's public schools, with the total number of incidents growing from 17,000 to 27,000. In the same timeframe, student enrolment has increased by just nine per cent. This is based on incidents reported in the workplace.

At HRCE and CSAP, which have been identified as having the highest rate of reported violent incidents relative to enrolment, the rate of enrolment has increased by 17 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively⁸.

② Inadequate processes for preventing and addressing violence in schools

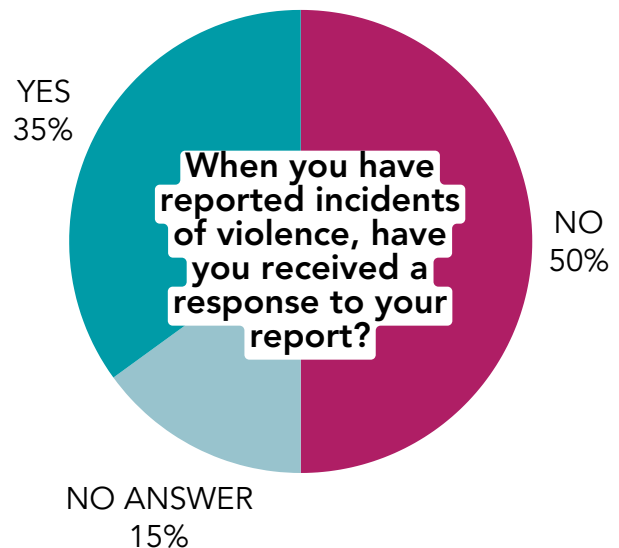


Employers are required under Section 7 of the Provincial Violence in the Workplace Regulations (under Section 82 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act) to develop a workplace violence prevention plan where a significant risk of violence is identified.

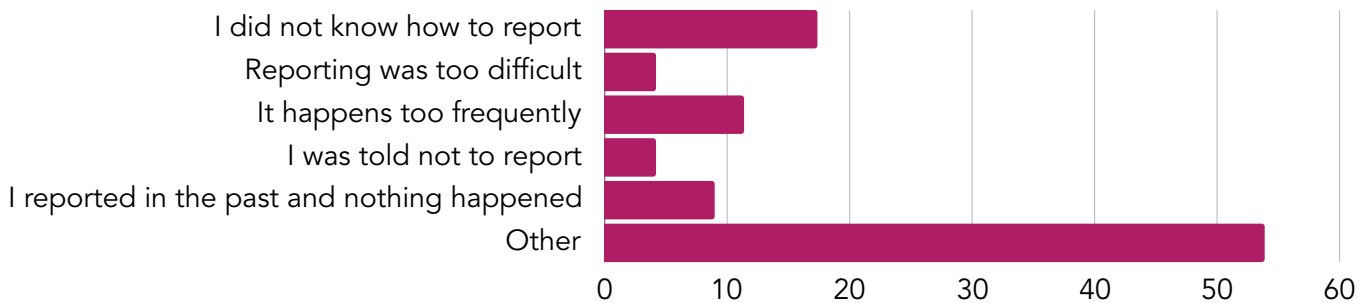
Employers are also required by Section 11 of the Regulations to provide training to employees on specific elements of the violence prevention plan.

Despite this, there is currently no province-wide strategy to address violence in schools. In some cases, schools are in violation of occupational health and safety law.

About half of CUPE school support staff have reported violence in the workplace, and a third were unsatisfied with the response they received. Over half never received a response at all.



In many cases, workers don't bother to report violent incidents at all. According to school support staff themselves, a lack of clarity in the process and lack of meaningful result are some of the reasons why workers aren't even reporting all violent incidents in schools.



These are some examples of the reasons filled in for "Other":

- "Waste of time. Nothing happens."
- "Didn't think it was serious enough."
- "Nothing will be done."
- "I don't have confidence that it would be handled properly."
- "Admin will never help fill out the forms for violent interactions."
- "Didn't feel it was serious enough - sometime part of the job."

"Just interested in knowing if these reports ever get to the correct person or are they just shredded?"

Another barrier to reporting is the sheer volume of incidents, concentrated to a smaller group of workers: "Often [workers'] entire workday was comprised of incidents, and it would be difficult to have them all reported."

One TA told us: "I am being choked, scratched, slapped, kicked, and bitten multiple times a day!! I have filled out numerous amounts of incidents reports about the child I work with and have given it to admin and never have they once talked to me about it."

③ Educators are not adequately supported to manage violence in their workplace

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, TAs at HRCE were all provided with Non-Violent Crisis Intervention (NVCI) training. However, now, training for TAs is limited, and the full NVCI training is reserved for only those TAs that HRCE management deems to be at the highest risk of violence.

We know, and told EECD in 2022, that our members want to have the tools to do their job: as one member told us, "A lot of EPAs non-violent crisis intervention has expired. I would love to see this course offered, so we could be up to date on this very important part of our job."

Another told us, "There is not enough support or training for EPAs and many people feel it is part of our job. Somethings we must deal with we have zero training as we are not doctors or specialists."

Another barrier in this area relates to a dismissive attitude regarding the severity of these incidents from management, sometimes calling it “part of the job.”

One TA told us, “When I have spoken to the VP or principal regarding the incidents, they make excuses... like once when rocks were being thrown at myself and another co-worker, the response by the VP was, ‘well, they were only small rocks.’ Also, at the school I work in, the children do not get sent home for physically assaulting staff.”

Currently, the Provincial Code of Conduct does not include guidance on managing unacceptable behaviour, including follow up on incidents and reporting of incidents to families. The Auditor General has recommended that this policy be updated to include these items.

"Pre-primary does not have the necessary support for challenging and violent behaviours. Our concerns often go unanswered, and we are left to deal with it ourselves. We are often short staffed as well that leads to increased incidents and burn out."

④ EECD does not collect sufficient and reliable information about violence in schools

Unfortunately, we do not actually know the full extent of this problem. As shocking as it may seem, no one actually knows exactly how many violent incidents are happening in our public schools, by students, in front of students, and against school support staff.

This is because data about violence in our schools is not properly collected. As noted above, there are many reasons school support staff are less inclined to report violent incidents, but even where they are confident and motivated to do so and have actually been given the tools and information to know how to report incidents, there are still barriers.

Occupational Health & Safety incident reports and Workers' Compensation Board reports are used in conjunction with a reporting tool called PowerSchool. PowerSchool is an online tool used for reporting unacceptable behaviour from students. But school support staff do not have access to PowerSchool. Teachers do, but TAs, EAs, ECEs, for example, do not.

These workers, who deal with the majority of violent incidents, need to ask a teacher or administrator to record incidents on their behalf. On top of that, the data collected via PowerSchool is not regularly analyzed for trends.

"What is the sense of filling out all our paperwork when nothing is ever done about it. School admins say it's part of the job. I did not sign up to be beaten every day. This year I have had to wear shin guards, arm guards, the jacket, gloves to work with a student. That should never be the case. I have filled out about 30 forms myself. It is not OK."

⑤ Changes to governance structures

As we all know, all the province's school boards, save the CSAP, were dissolved in 2018. These were replaced with School Advisory Councils (SAC). With both school boards and SACs there is an avenue for members of the community be elected to participate. However, in the new structure with RCEs and SACs instead of school boards, decision-making has become more centralized to EECD. The new structure has moved away from community members being elected to make decisions, as they were under school boards. SACs have little, if any, power to make decisions—including when it comes to how best to support workers, students, and reduce the risks contributing to violence.

This has also meant a reduction of community oversight within EECD and among the RCEs. This change six years ago cannot be discounted as a factor in the increase in violent incidents in that timeframe.

Shortly before this change (in 2017), the provincial government also passed Bill 148, the Public Services Sustainability Act. Bill 148 legislated three things that directly interfere with Section 2(d) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms⁹, as well as our human right to full, free, collective bargaining.

"Workplace Violence is traumatizing for those who experience it directly (support staff), but also those students who witness it happening to staff or classmates. There is no debriefing happening in the classroom after such incidents. To students who witness violence at school without debriefing, desensitization and an [attitude] that this is not a 'big deal' and is acceptable, is occurring."

"In my 7+ years working as an EPA I have been bitten, kicked, slapped, punched, spat on (in my face) had things thrown at me, verbally abused, and been threatened. I have also watched other children be hit, and all of the above."

Bill 148 includes three key elements that are an affront to international human rights standards and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It imposed a non-negotiated wage pattern on the entire public sector, ended the retirement allowance/public service award as of April 1, 2015, and prohibited an arbitrator from awarding anything above the wage pattern.

A group of unions have actually challenged Bill 148, and after a ruling by the Nova Scotia Supreme Court, a hearing is scheduled for June 2, 3, 4, and 5, 2025.¹⁰

The dissolution of school boards, and push for Legislation limiting collective bargaining, both have a direct impact on the daily lives of working people across this province, and the standard of education students receive in every community in Nova Scotia.

WHAT OUR MEMBERS ARE SAYING

"Nothing is ever being done to help us. Reports are filled out, but nothing has changed. We are told, it is part of our jobs, but it is not, and we do not get paid very much especially to account for that."

Understaffing

Understaffing is a major factor related to workplace violence for school support staff. In the same way that we understand growing class sizes are increasingly preventing teaching staff from adequately supporting each and every student according to their individual needs, staffing issues among school support staff also prevent each student from being adequately supported in the classroom.

This lack of adequate support for students is a risk factor for violence on its own and is compounded by the fact that school support staff must then deal with the fall-out (possibly a violent incident) without assistance or follow-up.

Compensation, benefits, and job security

Directly related to staffing, recruitment and retention are impacted by the school support staff being poorly compensated for the work they are responsible for, the challenges they experience on the job, and the value of the public service they provide.

"I have a plan to live in a tent behind our school next winter because I can't afford rent anymore."

The average annual salary of a CUPE member working in public schools is \$35,000. Very few classifications get permanent or even 12-month contracts. For almost all school support staff, workers are laid off at the end of the school year and are forced to rely on EI for the summer months before starting a new contract in September.

Despite receiving funding and mandates from the provincial EECD, school support staff deal with inconsistency and division from the different RCEs when it comes to contracts and employment benefits.

As we discovered through an extensive wage harmonization initiative over the past year, school support staff in some RCEs were making far lower wages than those doing the same work in other parts of the province.

For example, before the harmonization wage adjustments, ECEs and Child and Youth Care Practitioners were receiving over five dollars less per hour than school support staff at other RCEs. Some Computer Technicians were underpaid by over six dollars per hour.

"I have to work so many different jobs; I am working all the time. My health can't keep up."

School support staff at CBVRCE are the only group in this sector across the province with a defined-contribution pension plan, instead of a defined-benefit pension plan. Their plan also stands out in Canada as having the lowest pension contribution rate from any public-school board employer.

As one TA told us, "I also feel like we are extremely under paid for what we go through daily. I could work anywhere for the same amount and not be abused at work. But I absolutely love my job and these children, and I want to help make a difference in their lives."

Another said, "This kind of role is one where you need to go home and unwind not go to a second job afterwards."

Subpar wages which have not kept up with the exponential rise in cost of living in recent years and minimal benefits are not attractive to recruitment and retention. Violence, as with other health and safety issues at workplaces, can cause understaffing.

Conditions for education workers are directly tied to the quality of supports and services for students in schools.

Poverty rates and cost of living in Nova Scotia

When considering the mental and physical wellbeing of both school support staff and the students they work with, it's necessary to take a step back and consider the context working families in Nova Scotia are dealing with.

From 2021-2023, the child poverty rate in Nova Scotia—which measures the number of children living in low-income households—rose at a record rate of 18.4 per cent to 20.5 per cent. That is 35,330 children across the province. In other words, one in five kids in Nova Scotia lack secure and stable housing, adequate and nutritious food, and are living in households stressed by financial and job insecurity.

This spike happened as governments ended their pandemic-related financial assistance without addressing the root causes of poverty, including inadequate welfare income, discriminatory barriers to employment security, and holes in the social safety net, which all continue to exacerbate poverty rates in communities across the province.

Nova Scotia continues to lack rent control legislation, the provincial minimum wage is far below what is considered a living wage in any area of the province, and food prices continue to rise.

"Lost my house due to not being able to keep up with the mortgage payments. Had to live without electricity for a few months."

How do we fix it?

How do you fix this problem? The same way you fix address any major systemic problem: Listen to experts, listen to the people who are on the front lines. Here are five realistic steps to address this issue, developed by those who work with it every day.

Improving compensation and staffing levels for school support staff

School support staff are not adequately compensated, with regards to both wages and benefits. This is, unsurprisingly, a huge factor for recruitment and retention. School support staff in Nova Scotia being poorly compensated has led to staffing shortages, which increases the risk of workplace violence. As the rate of violence increases—with no improvement to compensation—it becomes another factor negatively impacting staffing in schools.

Improving training for staff

Regular, consistent, and up-to-date training must be available to school support staff. This includes non-violent crisis intervention, and other training, to ensure violent incidents are handled in a way that prioritizes the safety of staff and students, and that there is a consistently used approach to preventing violent incidents.

Removing barriers to reporting incidents

As the group facing the highest rates of violence, school support staff must be empowered to report violent incidents and have access to reporting mechanisms. School support staff cannot be required, or expected, to convey incident reports through another member of school staff.

Improving data collection and analysis

School support staff, along with school workers, must have access to a consistent and uniform method for reporting incidents of violence, which accounts for both repeated offenders and identifies the most high-risk situations. Individual and demographic trends for both students and staff should be tracked and regularly shared with workers and school communities, so that the EECD and management of RCEs and the CSAP can be held accountable by the workers and communities they are responsible for. This data is essential to understanding the scope of this issue of this going forward and tracking the success of strategies to be implemented to address it.

Stop excluding school support staff from participating in the development and implementation of strategies, policies and programs to address violence in schools

The voice, experience and expertise of workers needs to be at the forefront of any approach taken to address this issue. School support staff have years, sometimes decades, of experience in their schools, in their communities, and in their field.

As this report demonstrates, school support staff are ready to engage with management, with EECD, and with their communities, on the subject of violence in schools and share what we know.

That's why we opposed the exclusion of workers from the Provincial Standing Committee on Public Accounts' discussion of the Auditor General's report, that's why we demanded CUPE be allowed to participate, and that's why, despite being shut out, we showed up to the meeting anyway.

In response to the Auditor General's report, the provincial government has committed to consultation and development of a strategy, with the goal of releasing "Teacher Assistant Guidelines" and its full plan to address violence in 2025. As that report—and this one—notes, TAs experience the brunt of violence.

If the EECD wants us to believe they are taking this issue seriously, Teaching Assistants, and their union, must be included in this process. Workers must be part of any subsequent consultation and policy development.



- 1 Preventing and Addressing Violence in Nova Scotia Public Schools, Report of the Auditor General, to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, Kim Adair, June 11, 2024
- 2 Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee at Halifax Regional Centre for Education
- 3 Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee at Halifax Regional Centre for Education
- 4 Preventing and Addressing Violence in Nova Scotia Public Schools, Report of the Auditor General, to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, Kim Adair, June 11, 2024
- 5 Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee at South Shore Regional Centre for Education
- 6 Nova Scotia School Board Council of Unions survey on workplace violence, April 14-28, 2022
- 7 CUPE Nova Scotia bargaining survey, 2022
- 8 Nova Scotia School Board Council of Unions survey on workplace violence, April 14-28, 2022
- 9 Specifically, Section 2(d), referring to Freedom of Association
- 10 Eight unions continue to fight for basic rights and repeal of anti-worker legislation (Bill 148), CUPE Nova Scotia, September 11, 2023



