

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
September 24, 2024

Violence and Harassment Ever Present for Saskatchewan Education Workers

SASKATOON – A new study by University of Ottawa researchers is bolstering calls by the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation to address disturbingly high rates of workplace violence and harassment in Saskatchewan schools.

The study, *Beyond the Breaking Point: Violence Against Saskatchewan's Education Sector Workers*, reveals that 84 percent of education sector workers surveyed about the 2022-23 school year experienced at least one act, attempt or threat of physical force, while 87 percent reported incidents of harassment. Survey participants included teachers, direct student support workers such as educational assistants, and indirect student support workers such as custodial and clerical staff.

“Violence and harassment are often the result of students not having the professional support they need to participate successfully in classrooms and the school community,” says STF President Samantha Becotte. “Saskatchewan teachers have been raising the alarm about classroom violence for more than a decade. Years of education underfunding have created a crisis in schools. This study’s findings and the shocking personal experiences it chronicles are a dramatic illustration of how government’s neglect of public education has not only impacted the learning conditions of students, but also the working conditions of teachers and educational staff.”

The study, authored by Darby Mallory, Chris Bruckert, Darcy Santor and Hanya Ismail of the University of Ottawa, asked participants about their experiences and responses to workplace violence (i.e., acts, attempts and threats of physical force) and harassment (i.e., slurs, insults and put-downs).

A majority of respondents reported experiencing acts of physical force, with most of the violence being student-initiated. According to the survey:

- Almost three-quarters of respondents experienced one attempt of physical force from a student.
- Eighty-five percent witnessed at least one student-initiated act, attempt or threat against a co-worker.
- Seventy-eight percent reported one or more instance of student-initiated harassment, such as refusal to respect authority, swearing and offensive remarks.
- More than half (54 percent) of respondents experienced harassment by a parent.

“Education support workers have been asked to do more with less for years, but they are at a breaking point. Chronic underfunding and cuts to staffing levels has left our members on the frontlines experiencing violence in schools on a regular basis. It’s unacceptable,” says Karla Sastaunik, chair of CUPE Saskatchewan's Education Workers’ Steering Committee. “This fall, we want Saskatchewan people to vote for more staffing and better funding for our education sector. Saskatchewan kids and educators deserve the support they need.”

A lack of resources and support to address student needs means violence directed toward teachers and support staff is increasingly normalized as simply being “part of the job.” In their responses, education sector workers detailed impacts to their physical and mental health and described themselves as burnt out and dissatisfied with their jobs. For students, routinely witnessing violence is destabilizing and harms their access to instruction, capacity to learn and emotional well-being.

According to the study’s findings, only six percent of respondents indicated that actions taken to deal with the violence they experienced were “very effective.” Most institutional responses were reactive, deflective or dismissive – participants described having their concerns negated and incidents being “swept under the rug.” The effectiveness of proactive measures such as safety plans, which have the potential to address violence and harassment, is compromised by a chronic lack of resources in schools.

“Ensuring safe working and learning environments must be a priority for all elected officials responsible for schools and education,” Becotte says. “Teachers and educational staff are frustrated by the failure to recognize the realities faced by our schools and the lack of action by government to address violence and harassment. That’s why the STF’s Vote for Public Education campaign is asking all parties and candidates in this fall’s provincial and school board elections to make a public commitment to address classroom violence. We cannot afford to have committed teachers and educational staff leaving the profession because they are denied the resources they need to thrive as educators and support students.”

The full report is available on the [Violence and Harassment Against Educators Project](#) website.

For Information Contact:

Lynn Redl-Huntington
Manager, STF Communications
306-221-4209
lynn.redlhuntington@stf.sk.ca

Katherine Norton
Canadian Union of Public Employees
306-510-6706
knorton@cupe.ca