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**HARASSMENT  
& VIOLENCE  
AGAINST  
EDUCATORS**

**IN HARM'S WAY:  
THE EPIDEMIC OF VIOLENCE AGAINST  
EDUCATION SECTOR WORKERS IN ONTARIO**

***FULL REPORT***

*“With all the cutbacks it gets harder and harder to do our job.  
More for less is not a good thing in education.  
I feel we are just fire extinguishers going  
from one incident to the next.”*

*~ Education Assistant, Elementary School*

Chris Bruckert, Darcy Santor and Brittany Mario  
University of Ottawa

November 2021

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## Foreword

In 2019, the Harassment and Violence against Educators project released *Facing the facts: The escalating crisis of violence against elementary school educators in Ontario*. That report examined the experiences of elementary school educators with a primary focus on teachers. In this report, we examine the harassment and violence experienced by the often-overlooked classroom-based and school support workers in Ontario's schools who are not teachers – including educational assistants, early childhood educators, child and youth workers, clerical, maintenance/trade, and food service workers – but who are critical to the smooth running of our schools and who play a vital role in the education of Ontario's children. To the best of our knowledge this is the first study of its kind that examines harassment and violence in these education sector workers in Canada and the first to examine different profiles of sources (i.e., students, colleagues, parents, and administrators).

This report, which presents the results of the *Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey*, is organized into seven sections: (1) Scope of the Issue: Harassment and Violence against Workers in the Education Sector examines the extent, frequency, and nature of workplace harassment and violence experienced by classroom-based workers and school support staff in Ontario; (2) Impacts, Costs, and Coping focuses on the multifaceted and layered effects of workplace harassment and violence; (3) Context: Age and Incivility explores the relationship between rates of harassment and violence and incivility in the workplace; (4) Responses and Reporting unpacks the administrative and institutional response to violence and harassment; (5) Designated Groups: Vulnerability, Experiences, and Response considers the ways gender, sexual orientation, dis/ability, Indigeneity and racialization impact the nature of, and response to, harassment and violence; (6) Comparison of Classroom-based and School support workers reflects on differences between the experiences of staff who work in the classroom and school support staff; and (7) Readiness and Training reports on the level of preparedness of education sector workers to deal with instances of harassment and violence and the training needs of these workers. The report's Conclusion provides a summary and recommendations. A word of caution that the descriptions of workplace violence in this report may be disturbing and triggering for some readers.

### Methodological notes

Between February 3, 2020, and March 13, 2020, shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic, 3,854 CUPE Education Workers (Ontario) participated in the *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey*. These workers, both classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, designated early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, IT, and maintenance staff), were asked about their experiences of a broad range of workplace harassment (e.g., slurs, insults, and put-downs) as well as threats, attempts, and acts of physical aggression (e.g., hitting, kicking, pushing) in the 2018-2019 school year. They were also asked about administrative and collegial responses to those incidents and the impact that harassment and violence had on their physical, emotional, professional, mental, and social wellbeing. In addition to documenting experiences, the goal of this research was to consider how harassment and violence is conditioned by the school environment and by workers' intersecting identities. The study deployed a mixed methods approach in which quantitative and qualitative data were used to provide a fulsome picture of education workers' experiences. The quantitative analysis was generated using SAS/STAT software [Version 9.4] of the SAS System for Windows 10. The open-ended questions were thematically coded using NVivo software [Version 12] and subsequently subject to a horizontal and vertical analysis. In the interests of confidentiality all quotations are presented in italics but without other identifiers (e.g., gender, school board).

### The investigators

Dr. Chris Bruckert is a professor of criminology at the University of Ottawa. She has been conducting research on, teaching about, and mobilizing against, gendered violence for over twenty-five years. Dr. Darcy A. Santor is a practicing clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of Ottawa. He has a long-standing interest in mental health in young people and in school-based mental health. Brittany Mario is a PhD candidate in criminology at the University of Ottawa and has been a part of the *Harassment and Violence Against Educators* project since 2019. Her research interests include gendered violence and mental health impacts for women who experience violence.

### 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 assistance CUPE/Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (CUPE/OSBCU) provided in forwarding the survey to its members, and the CUPE Local released officers who promoted the research amongst their membership. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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## Key findings

- 89% percent of participants reported at least one act, attempt, or threat of physical force from one or more sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, administrators) during the 2018-2019 school year. Most of the violence was student initiated: 70% of classroom-based workers and school support staff reported experiencing one or more acts of physical force (e.g., hitting, kicking, biting, being hit by a thrown object) from a student during the 2018-2019 school year.
- There are alarmingly high rates of harassment against classroom-based and school support workers in Ontario's elementary schools: 95% of survey respondents reported at least one type of harassment from one or more sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, administrators) during the 2018-2019 school year.
- Women participants reported higher levels of harassment from students and parents, as well as higher levels of violence from students compared to their male counterparts; women also reported working more overtime, higher workload increases, less ability to meet workplace demands, and greater familial impacts.
- BIPOC participants reported higher rates of reprisals for reporting instances of harassment or violence. BIPOC participants' experiences of violence and harassment included racial slurs, microaggressions, and the targeting of religious and cultural symbols (e.g., hijab).
- Participants identifying as having a disability reported significantly higher levels of harassment from colleagues and administrators than did educators who did not identify as disabled. They also reported elevated levels of workplace reprisals and failure to accommodate (including when the disability was acquired at the workplace).
- Harassment and violence have lasting effects on mental health, physical health, and job performance. Higher levels of harassment and verbal violence, as well as higher levels of physical violence, were associated with diminished physical health, mental health, and job performance, even when assessed some six months after the school year in which the harassment and violence occurred.
- Results from the survey indicate that 18% of educational assistants (EAs) would be designated with PTSD following their worst incident of harassment and 13.5% of EAs would be designated with PTSD following their worst incident of violence in the past year. Results of the survey indicate that one in six classroom-based workers and school support staff were either at imminent risk of burnout (7.21%) or would meet formal criteria for burnout (7.86%). The qualitative analysis of the data demonstrates that the risk of burnout and disengagement is exacerbated when a lack of collegial and administrative respect, support, and acknowledgment operates alongside rapidly evolving/increasing workplace expectations.
- Replacing classroom-based and school support staff for time lost due to workplace harassment or violence is conservatively estimated to cost Ontario at least 3.5 million dollars per year.
- Workplace violence and harassment have significant impacts on the personal lives of education sector workers. This result was particularly striking for classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants) – 87% indicated it had a substantial (and often multifaceted) impact.
- In terms of impact, frequent and seemingly less severe forms of harassment (e.g., a put down) are as significantly related to health and well-being as less frequent but more severe forms of harassment (e.g., false accusations).
- Over 80% of classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, maintenance) participating in the *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Educators (Ontario) Survey* indicated that the levels of harassment and violence have increased in the past ten years.
- Results indicate a disturbing normalization of workplace violence; EAs and early childhood educators (ECEs), in particular, report a general acceptance by administrators that violence 'is part of the job', creating a context in which the harms they suffer are minimized or negated. Participants also report being blamed when they experience workplace violence.

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## What does the literature tell us?

In *Facing the Facts: The escalating crisis of violence against elementary school educators in Ontario*, we concluded that a “crisis of harassment and violence against elementary school educators in Ontario has emerged and intensified over the past 15 years” (p. 34). We also noted that, notwithstanding media attention (e.g., Burke, 2017; Latchford, 2017; Miller, 2019a, 2019b; Rosella, 2017; Shahzad, 2017; van Rooy, 2017; Westoll, 2017) and mobilization by federations and unions representing educators (e.g., ETFO, 2018; CTF, 2018; OECTA, 2017), student-initiated violence against educators has received limited scholarly attention in Canada (for notable exceptions see, however, Chen et al., 2019; Lanthier et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2011; Younghusband, 2009). By contrast, since 2011 when the American Psychological Association Board of Educational Affairs Task Force released its ground-breaking report on student-initiated workplace violence against educators, a body of literature on the topic has emerged in the United States.

When we examine the existing (predominantly American) literature on violence against educators, we see that while methodological differences (e.g., sampling method, time frame, definitions of violence) impede easy comparisons, studies consistently identify high levels of student-initiated violence against educators. Indeed, a 2018 meta-analysis by Longobardi et al., (2019) concluded that “the prevalence of any type of teacher-reported violence victimization within two years ranged from 20% to 75% with a pooled prevalence of 53%” (p. 1). Unsurprisingly, workplace violence is having a significant impact on education workers. Commonly noted adverse effects include high teacher turnover (Curran et al., 2019; Tiesman et al., 2014), elevated levels of fear (Wilson et al., 2011), damaged professional self-identity (Skåland, 2016), and – perhaps most consistently – poorer physical and psychological health (Gunnarsdottir et al., 2006; Konda, 2020; Landsbergis, 2018; Younghusband, 2009). The impacts of violence on the physical and psychological wellbeing of educators are related to another key finding from the literature – elevated levels of stress (Fox & Stallworth, 2010; Konda, 2020, Landsbergis, 2018; Reddy et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2011; Younghusband, 2009).

Overwhelmingly, the above-noted literature focuses on teachers rather than other workers in the education sector (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators, clerical workers, maintenance personnel, food-services staff) – a population which, as Schofield et al. (2017) write: “may be in more precarious positions of employment. They may not be afforded the same level of contractual protections and benefits, training, preparation, supervision and/or economic compensation [...]. These factors, and others, may put them at increased risk of student-related injury and increase the potential impacts of workplace injuries.” (p. 1). Notably, research conducted by CUPE Ontario (2017) found that “fifty-eight percent of EAs (i.e., educational assistants) were injured by a student during an 18-month survey period. Almost half required hospitalization or other medical attention beyond workplace first-aid” (n.p.). It is imperative that all education sector workers are included in conversations about the workplace violence that increasingly characterizes Ontario’s schools. This report is one step towards that goal.

*Imagine how it feels to have our government leadership constantly insulting you in the news? Imagine how it feels to have parents deem you greedy for wanting/begging for more support? How it feels to miss part of your lunch hour or breaks because you are dealing with behaviour? How it feels to not be allowed to relieve your bladder because it isn't break time but there are only two staff bathrooms for a team of fifty, and you can't be late for your next assignment, so you can't pee during your break or class time. Imagine how it feels to have to resist drinking water because then you will have to pee? Imagine how it feels to be belittled by the kids we support, by society, and most especially by our elected government leaders? We are constantly marginalized, criticized, and put down by everyone. It has become acceptable to treat us like garbage. (EA)*

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## Definitions of harassment and violence

The *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario)* was designed to assess the frequency of various forms of harassment and physical violence, the impact on the health and well-being of educators, and the learning environment of the classroom.

Definitions for harassment and violence were adopted from those of the Ontario Ministry of Labour.

### **Physically violent and threatening behaviour is ...**

The exercise, attempt, or threat of physical force, or a statement or a behaviour that could reasonably be interpreted as a threat to exercise physical force. Examples include:

- exercising physical force (e.g., hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling, being hit by a thrown object, sexual assault);
- an attempt to exercise physical force (e.g., trying to hit, kick, bite, or throw an object);
- any threat to exercise physical force (e.g., verbal threats, shaking a fist in someone's face, wielding a weapon, leaving threatening notes or sending threatening e-mails).

### **Workplace harassment is ...**

Unwelcome words or actions that are known or should be known to be offensive, embarrassing, humiliating, or demeaning to a worker or behaviour that intimidates, isolates, or discriminates against the targeted individual(s). It includes bullying, psychological harassment, and sexual harassment. Examples of workplace harassment include:

- verbal taunts and put-downs;
- remarks, jokes or innuendos that demean, ridicule, or offend;
- offensive phone calls, texts, social media posts, or e-mails;
- leering or inappropriate staring;
- unnecessary physical contact of a sexual nature;
- comments about someone's physical characteristics, mannerisms, or conformity to sex-role stereotypes;
- homophobic taunts;
- bullying;
- false accusations or spreading rumours.

### **Inappropriate behaviours are ...**

Actions and/or words that may not meet the threshold for harassment but are nonetheless not acceptable behaviour in an educational setting. Unlike workplace harassment, inappropriate behaviour is not addressed in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act of Ontario*. Examples include:

- obscene gestures;
- a single verbal insult;
- disrespectful attitude or actions (e.g., not recognizing the educator's authority or expertise, belittling);
- individuals "ganging up" against the target.

### **A note on the language of violence ...**

Recognizing that education workers experience student-initiated workplace violence is not paramount to saying students are violent in the conventional sense of forming intent. One EA noted, "*I think many of us struggle with terms like 'violence' [which] suggests intent to harm. Many behaviours we deal with are violent in nature, however, the students themselves are not violent in nature – they don't have the ability to express themselves in a safe/expected manner (e.g., poor communication or self-regulation skills).*"

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# Demographics of the sample<sup>1</sup>

## Personal demographics

Gender: 88% of the sample identified as female, 10% as male, 0.08% as non-binary; the remainder chose not to disclose.

Age: Most participants were over 50 (35%) or between the ages of 41 and 50 (30%); 22% were between 31 and 40 years of age; 11% were under 30 years old; the remainder chose not to disclose.

Race/ethnicity: Most participants identified as white (84%); 3% as Asian, 2.6% as Indigenous, 2.2% as Black, 1% as Middle Eastern, and 0.9% as Latin American. 4.2% of respondents preferred not to answer.

Dis/ability: 6.6% of respondents indicated they identify as having a disability, 90% indicated they did not; the remainder preferred not to answer.

LGBTQ+: Only 2.4% of the sample identified as being part of the LGBTQ+ community; 95% indicated they were not; 2.6% preferred not to answer.

Highest level of education: Most respondents indicated they had a college diploma (67%), 13% had an undergraduate degree, and 2.3% had a Bachelor of Education, 1% had a graduate degree in education, and 2.3% had a graduate degree in some other field; 9% had a high school diploma.

## Professional demographics

Primary position: Most respondents (69%) identified as being classroom-based; 58% were educational assistants; 11% Designated Early Childhood Educators. A further 12% of participants were instructors, student supervisors, and library workers. 19% of participants identified as support personnel, which included office administrators (9.6%), custodial workers (7.3%), IT/AV support staff (0.7%), and maintenance staff (0.6%).

Workload: The majority (84%) of participants worked full-time; 4.5% worked permanent part-time; the remainder were either temporary (4.3%) or casual (4.6%) employees.

Experience: The average number of years worked in the education sector was 13.5 years. Approximately 20% of the sample had been working for five or fewer years, 24% for 6 to 10 years, 24% for 11 to 17 years, 20% for 18 to 25 years, and 11% for 25 or more years.

Student contact: Participants reported that, on average they spent, 43% of their time with students in grades K to 3; 23% with students in grades 4 to 8; 16% with students in grades 9 to 12.

School type: Most respondents worked in elementary schools (65%), 4% worked in kindergarten to grade 12 schools, while 3% were employed in middle schools. The remainder worked in high schools (15%); 11% of our sample indicated “other.”

Community size: Most participants (43%) worked in communities of between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants; 22% worked in communities ranging from 100,000 to 500,001 inhabitants; 7% in communities from 500,000 and 1,000,000 inhabitants; 13% in communities with over 1 million inhabitants.

Catchment area: Most respondents described their school’s catchment area as suburban (41%) or urban (city center) (33%). 26% indicated the school was in a rural area. Most indicated that the school was in middle-class areas (58%), 25% described the catchment area as poor (22%) or very poor (3%) while 14% described the area as well off and 3% indicated it was an extremely affluent area.

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<sup>1</sup> Percentages have been rounded up or down.

# 1. Scope of the issue: Harassment and violence against education sector workers

*“Violence in the education system is becoming an epidemic and is constantly being swept under the rug.” (EA)*

## 1.1 Harassment against education sector workers: Overview

### Rates of harassment

Findings showed that certain forms of harassment and verbal violence, such as insults, put-downs, and/or obscene gestures from students, are experienced by 75% percent of classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, maintenance), whereas other forms, such as comments that ridicule, demean or offend (60%), being ‘ganged up’ on (32%), and the spreading of false accusations (25%) are experienced less frequently. Our results indicate that 95% percent of participants reported at least one type of harassment from one or more sources over the school year.

While physical violence from parents, colleagues, and administrators was rare, reports of harassment and verbal violence from parents, colleagues, and administrators, was substantially higher. Indeed, approximately one in six participants experienced false accusations from parents, one in five experienced false accusations from colleagues, and one in ten experienced false accusations from their administrator (i.e., principal or vice-principal). Reports of feeling ‘ganged up on’ from colleagues, parents, and administrators were also made by approximately one in ten educators. These findings suggest that classroom-based workers and school support staff are likely to experience harassment and verbal violence from a range of individuals, including parents, colleagues, and administrators.

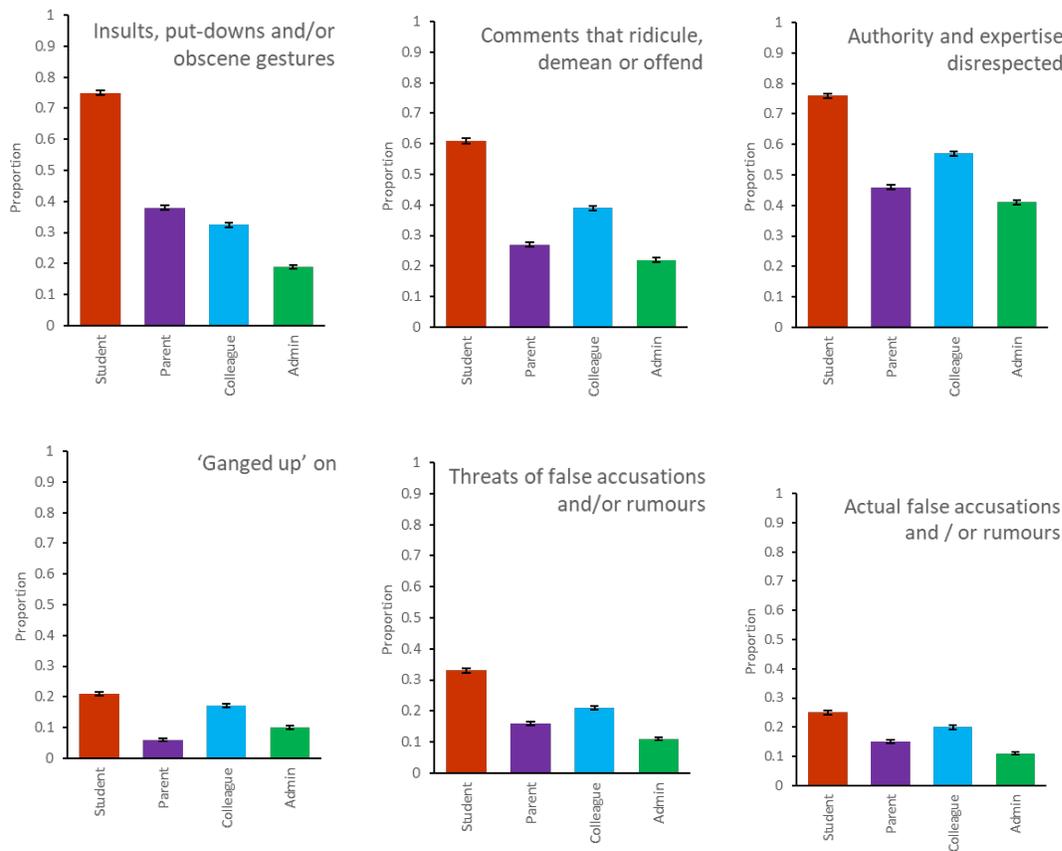


Figure 1: Rates of harassment experienced by CUPE education workers

**Description**

When 95% of education sector workers – both those who work in classrooms and those, like clerical workers, who do not – indicate that they experienced at least one type of harassment in the 2018-2019 school year, we can confidently assert that harassment against classroom-based workers and school support staff in Ontario’s schools is a significant problem. Indeed, for some education sector workers the abuse is ubiquitous; one wrote of a “large group of students [who] chose to display non-compliant, rude, taunting, mocking, and verbally abusive behaviour toward me on a continual basis.”

When asked about their worst incident of harassment or inappropriate behaviour in the 2018-2019 school year, almost half (48.9%) of the survey participants indicated that the harassment was student-initiated. The next most common group (25.6%) were colleagues (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators, custodians, teachers, but excluding administrators); by contrast, parents (10.5%) and administrators (11.8%) were much less likely to be named. We see also that the experiences and kinds of harassment vary across perpetrator types; this specificity is examined below.

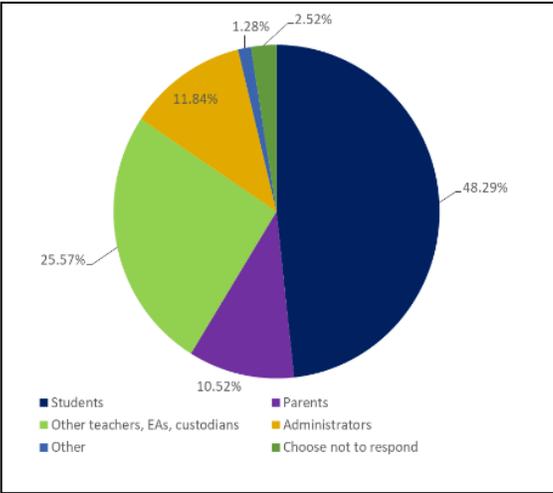


Figure 2: Persons who initiated the worst incident of harassment

Student-initiated harassment

Education sector workers described verbal abuse – predominantly comprised of disrespectful behaviour such as yelling and swearing – from students. Attending to the content of the abuse – what was said/shouted – highlights the fact that students are deploying racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic, and fatphobic language to denigrate workers. In other words, intersecting identities inform the nature of the abuse to which workers are subjected. For example, one survey respondent recounted, “The student called me names, swore at me and told another staff member that I kicked him when in fact I used the Behaviour Management Systems that the school board trains us in and blocked his kick to my leg with my foot. He called me ugly, stupid bitch, whore, n\*\*\*, and fucker. He was in senior kindergarten with no official diagnosis.”

*Please know that every word and every action you can imagine has been taken out on a EA. Cunt, bitch, whore, fucker, faggot. ALL of it has been said to me and to every other EA I work with. It is endless. (EA)*

Another, highlighting the gendered undertones of much of the abuse women workers reported, described being “belittled or put down due to my age. A Grade 5 female student tried to scare me with threats to my safety, using the weakness of my age and looks ‘you’ re fat, old, have warts on your face so I don’t have to listen to you’.”

False accusations or rumours (or threats thereof) were also a common manifestation of student-initiated harassment for survey participants. As noted above, 25% of respondents had been the victim of student-initiated false allegations or rumours in the 2018-2019 school year. Participants detailed stories of students (falsely) claiming that an education sector worker had been verbally, sexually, or physically aggressive. Such accusations, sometimes amplified by parents, can have serious ramifications for the well-being of workers who live under a cloud of suspicion until (and sometimes even after) they are cleared of wrongdoing: “A student assaulted me and then made a false allegation of abuse against me. My supervisors had to phone CAS as they have to report. I was exonerated but I have 2 little boys and the thought that a student could potentially put me in danger of losing my job and my children was awful. This affected every aspect of my life.”

*Verbal threats and school lockdowns. Rude comments, being verbally abused by students, and generally disrespected. Feeling like I am thankful to be going home rather than heading to the hospital. Being bit, kicked, punched, scratched, having my shirt ripped, objects being thrown at me on top of verbal abuse and laughter throughout as if was a game. This is a REGULAR occurrence in our school. (EA)*

Participants also told us that students would frequently and overtly undermine their authority or question their professional competency. The following quotation illustrates not only the experience of being belittled and disrespected but also speaks to false accusations: “I asked a student several times to remove his hat in class, he refused and told me to fuck off and to stop picking on him. He accused me of bullying him and said his mom says he doesn’t have to show respect to EAs.”

### Parent-initiated harassment

Survey participants described harassment from parents as principally comprised of disrespectful comments, yelling, and/or swearing. They explained that the disrespect from parents was demeaning and belittling in nature and that their authority and professional capability were often questioned. These experiences are exemplified clearly in this respondent's story: *"When trying to communicate to parents the challenges their child had in the classroom both socially and physically, I was verbally attacked for not doing my job, not being educated enough, for not protecting their child from others. I was trying to come up with strategies and solutions and they constantly blamed everyone around the student and did not seem interested in working together. The father would scream and yell during meetings accusing me of many things, when the whole time I was trying to help his child. Eventually I stopped going to meetings and the principal had to deal with these parents."*

*A parent was very dismissive of me due to my age. She began yelling in the hallway, swearing at me and saying I must be a joke because there was no way I was qualified to help her child. She was eventually escorted out of the building. (EA)*

### Colleague-initiated harassment

Harassment by colleagues overwhelmingly took the form of belittling and having professional expertise questioned, undermined, and undervalued. In fact, over half (56%) of survey respondents indicated that they had at least one incident of colleagues either belittling them or questioning/not recognizing their authority and expertise in the 2018-2019 school year. Survey participants described being left out of team decisions and meetings, having their skills and expertise scrutinized and criticized, being micromanaged, repeatedly told how to do their job, and being spoken to in a condescending manner.

Many of these behaviours are repetitive, and as such, they bear the hallmarks of workplace bullying (Hutchinson, 2013); like much workplace bullying, occupational status stratifications appear to be implicated. One early childhood educator described her experience, *"[I was] belittled by my teaching partner. Disrespected in front of parents. The teacher was telling parents that I am not as important. That I am just the ECE [early childhood educator] and didn't go to university like a teacher."* Another participant, an educational assistant, described *"feeling left out, undervalued as an EA."* Workers also spoke of not having their professional judgement and competence respected: *"On a regular basis, I am questioned on my ability to make decisions about the student that I care for, and regardless of my experience and training they make it quite clear that it is above my position to make these kinds of decisions."*

*I would often be undermined in front of the students, or my opinions based on the student that I directly worked with were not accepted. I was actually told to not interfere, redirect or discipline in the classroom. I was expected to just sit at the back of the room and only interact with the student that I was assigned to when needed. Often comments would be made of a demeaning nature in general about women. (EA)*

### Administrator-initiated harassment

Harassment from administrators (i.e., principals and vice-principals) can take a range of forms and, to the extent that it often includes belittlement and the questioning of professional expertise, replicates the harassment these workers experience from colleagues. Education-sector workers detailed many stories of their administrators or supervisors being condescending and generally undervaluing their work – this manifested in a lack of aid during and after a crisis with a student, being left out of meetings, micromanaging their work, and being ignored. For example, one early childhood educator described her experience: *"The amount of times Admin would walk into the room, scan the environment, and walk right past me to talk to the teacher. If I walked past her in the hallway and said 'hello' she would look at me and completely ignore me. I was told by her that 'I did not need to come to parent teacher night as her teaching staff were quite capable on their own.' Constantly being left out of meetings regarding my students' behaviour and diagnostic results because 'the teachers will pass on the information'. The list goes on and on."*

*My administrators demeaned my skills in front of other workers and went out of their way to make me feel unwelcomed with glares, eye rolling, and under-the-breath remarks. (EA)*

## 1.2 Violence against education sector workers: Overview

### Rates of physical violence

The proportion of classroom-based workers and school support staff experiencing different forms of violence are depicted in Figure 3. Results show that 70 percent of classroom-based workers and school support staff experienced some type of physical force (e.g., hitting, kicking, biting, being hit by a thrown object) during the 2018-2019 school year, more than 70% report one or more attempts to use physical force by a student, and almost 60% experienced one or more threats to use physical force during the same period of time. These rates are alarmingly high. 89% percent of participants reported at least one act, attempt, or threat of physical force from one or more sources over the 2018-2019 school year. Expectedly, the proportion of classroom-based workers and school support staff experiencing threats, attempts, and acts of physical force from parents, colleagues, and administrators was low but not insignificant; one in twenty participants experienced a threat to use physical force from a parent during the 2018-2019 school year. Threats to use force from colleagues and administrators were extremely low but nonetheless still present.

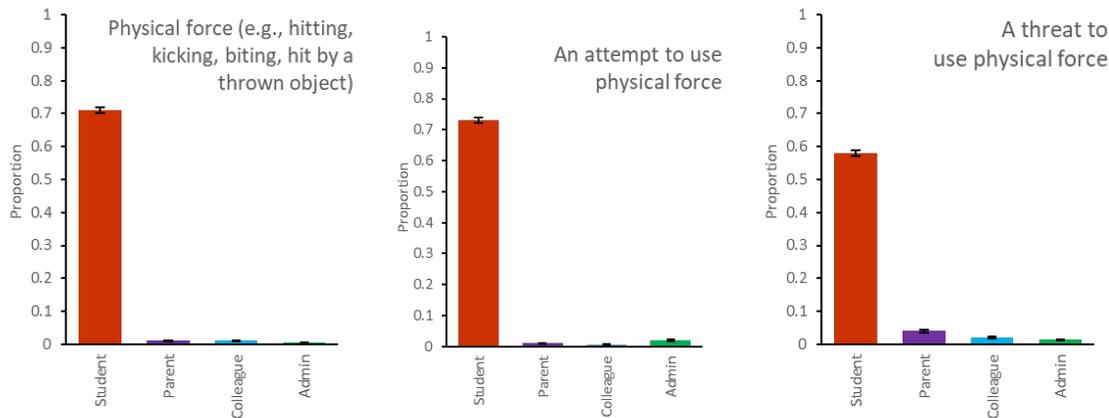


Figure 3: Rates of violence experienced by education assistants, early childhood educator and school support staff.

### Description

Classroom-based workers and school support staff explained that acts, attempts, and threats of physical force were overwhelmingly perpetrated by students. Unsurprisingly, those educators who had the most direct contact with students (e.g., EAs, ECEs) also experienced the most violence. These participants wrote in detail about being kicked, hit, punched, slapped, choked, scratched, strangled, spat at, head butted, kneed in the crotch, and threatened (and sometimes cut) with scissors. They also spoke of having to dodge thrown items, being assaulted by meter sticks, being tripped, being urinated on, having their hair pulled, getting their clothes torn, and being bit – in one case “so badly that the doctor asked me what kind of animal it was.” Often acts of aggression are accompanied by swearing, name calling, and verbal abuse. Verbal aggression that, as we examine further in Section Five of this report, disturbingly often racist, sexist, sizeist, homophobic, and Islamophobic. One participant summed it up as: “Getting spit at, chairs being thrown, being called demeaning names (C\*nt, b\*itch, wh\*re, f\*ck off, etc.), getting hit, punched, kicked, screamed at, my family demeaned and threatened, my life threatened. Not just one incident, but ongoing throughout every day.”

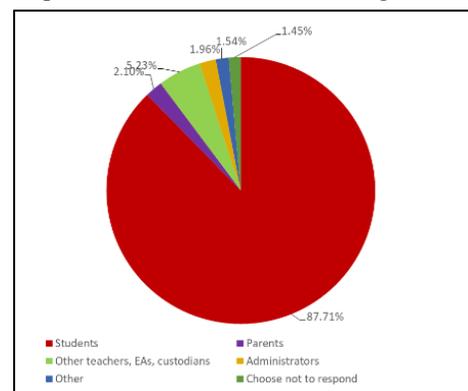


Figure 4: Persons who initiated the worst incident of violence

*I was often left by myself in a padded room with an extremely violent grade four boy. I have permanent nerve damage in my leg. I ended up on a mental medical leave due to panic attacks. (EA)*

The acts of aggression participants described were not (as the general public might imagine) the ineffectual tap of an annoyed youngster, but were serious and sometimes terrifying experiences (e.g., “*having the class evacuated [and] being alone with a student and having that student throw objects at me such as scissors, chairs, books while telling me they will kill me*”) that can result in significant physical injuries to education sector workers, including concussions, fractures, dislocated joints, back and head injuries, infections, and whiplash. In short, these can be serious assaults that have long-term impacts on the workers who then find themselves off work, undergoing physical therapy, paying for counselling, unable to do everyday activities, and/or “*in pain daily*.” For example, one participant described needing to take time off work after she was “*attacked by a grade 8 student resulting in concussion, retinal detachment, and jaw and neck injuries*.” Another wrote: “*I was punched in the face by a grade 12 student. I went to hospital and he had shifted my jaw. He was suspended for a week but I was off for two weeks because of the pain*.” And a third described her experience after being assaulted by two students: “*My tooth was chipped, and I had a concussion which progressed to Post Concussion Syndrome and PTSD*.”

*Over the years it has affected a lot of my life. I've had numerous injuries, broken bones, scratches, bruises and so on. Now close to my retirement I have a terminal illness. (EA)*

While often emerging in the context of escalation, these incidents can also be random acts of aggression: “*I was punched in the back by a student when his bus wasn't on time. Did not expect it at all*.” Similarly, while certainly some of the aggression is emulating from students with complex needs, this is by no means always the case: “*A student was extremely defiant, oppositional, hostile and hit/punched/kicked/bit me almost daily. This student doesn't have special needs*.” Moreover, a number of participants pointed out that they sustained injuries when they were endeavouring to protect other students or colleagues; one told us “*I was body blocking my pregnant co-teacher while the student threw chairs at us*.” Another described: “*A grade five was yelling at another student. Another staff directed the student to the gym. Student continued to yell and push the other student. I used my body to block the hits. I tried to talk the student to calm down. I was pushed four to six times*.” A third explained that “*while blocking one student from attacking peers [he] grabbed both my breasts extremely hard*.”

*I put my body between the outburst and other students in the class. My job is no longer to assist in education it is to manage behaviour. That is not what I was originally hired for. (EA)*

Unsurprisingly school support staff with less frequent and/or ongoing direct contact with students (e.g., clerical workers, custodial staff) reported dramatically less violence from students. That said, these workers also experienced acts of aggression and identified students as the most likely perpetrators of threats, attempts, and acts of violence. For example, one participant wrote: “*I am not in a classroom. I [have] been kicked and punched, on a regular basis, just walking past students*.” It would appear, however, that clerical staff are particularly vulnerable precisely because “*students are being sent to the office when in an escalated rage*.” One clerical worker told us that she “*can't work because [she is] keeping an eye out for flying objects*.” Others were directly targeted (“*a student came across the desk and punched me in the face and ripped my glasses off*”) or indirectly because they were “*in the line of fire*” when, for example, “*an escalated student was spitting at administrators*.” Here too, workers are often subjected to language that, in the picturesque words of one clerical worker, “*could even make a sailor blush*.”

*A student spit in my face while I was fixing a broken window. (Custodian)*

In short, not only is violence experienced by classroom-based workers and school support staff outrageously high, but the violence is pervasive and potentially very serious. Participants noted that increases in aggression coupled with decreasing staffing levels leave workers facing volatile situations without adequate support. One EA explained: “*I worked in a grade one classroom with another EA and teacher. I had six kids with complex needs; four of the six students had one-to-one support the previous year and last year this support was cut down to two EAs with no coverage for our lunches and breaks*.”

### 1.3 Frequency of harassment and violence

The 2018-2019 *Harassment and Violence against Educators (Ontario) Survey* was designed to assess the frequency of various forms of harassment and physical violence, their impact on the health and well-being of classroom-based workers and school support staff, and how they affect the learning environment of the classroom. Participants in this survey were asked to indicate how often they experienced harassment and violence in a multiple-option format (e.g., none, 1 to 3, 4 to 10, 11 to 20, more than 20 times). From these responses (see Figure 1 on page 7), we were able to calculate the proportion of educators who experienced any harassment or violence at all and also estimate the overall frequency of different forms of harassment and violence.

The mean number of incidents for various types of harassment from different sources, including students, parents, colleagues, and administrators, is reported in Table 1. These results show that classroom-based workers and school support staff report approximately 8.5 instances of insults, put-downs, and gestures from students, 1.22 from parents, 1.37 from colleagues and 0.70 from administrators in a *single* year. The mean number of jokes or innuendo intended to demean was similarly high. In contrast, the mean frequency of false accusations and rumours experienced from students (1.05) was higher than the mean frequency experienced from parents (0.28), similar to the mean frequency experienced from colleagues, but lower than the mean frequency experienced from administrators (0.35). The frequency of physical force (8.64), attempts to use physical force (9.14), and threats of physical force (6.52) from students was high relative to the frequency of physical force, attempt to use physical force, and threats of physical force from parents, colleagues, and administrators, which was less frequent but still present. Estimates concerning the frequency of harassment and violence indicate that for most individuals who experience harassment and violence, these are repetitive occurrences rather than isolated incidents. Classroom-based workers and school support staff who experience harassment and violence are likely to experience multiple instances of different types throughout the entire school year. These results speak to the fact that harassment and violence is very much a repetitive and ongoing experience.

Table 1: Frequency of harassment and physical violence from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators

|                                   | Student |      |      | Parent |      |      | Colleague |      |      | Administrator |      |      |
|-----------------------------------|---------|------|------|--------|------|------|-----------|------|------|---------------|------|------|
|                                   | N       | M    | SD   | N      | M    | SD   | N         | M    | SD   | N             | M    | SD   |
| Insults, put-downs, gestures      | 3865    | 8.47 | 8.73 | 3863   | 1.22 | 3.29 | 3854      | 1.37 | 3.73 | 3854          | 0.70 | 2.71 |
| Jokes or innuendo that demean     | 3864    | 5.44 | 7.68 | 3868   | 0.77 | 2.52 | 3867      | 1.68 | 4.10 | 3862          | 0.76 | 2.81 |
| Authority, expertise disrespected | 3868    | 8.36 | 8.59 | 3874   | 1.82 | 4.22 | 3866      | 2.97 | 5.46 | 3854          | 1.94 | 4.58 |
| Being ‘ganged up’ on              | 3815    | 1.02 | 3.47 | 3816   | 0.13 | 1.03 | 3812      | 0.61 | 2.53 | 3810          | 0.36 | 2.03 |
| Threats of false accusations      | 3821    | 1.91 | 4.83 | 3822   | 0.73 | 2.75 | 3822      | 0.73 | 2.75 | 3816          | 0.35 | 1.92 |
| Actual false accusations          | 3816    | 1.05 | 3.48 | 3815   | 0.28 | 1.36 | 3814      | 0.67 | 2.55 | 3816          | 0.35 | 1.99 |
| Use of physical force             | 3117    | 8.64 | 8.89 | 3121   | 0.01 | 0.14 | 3122      | 0.03 | 0.60 | 3123          | 0.02 | 0.43 |
| An attempt to use physical force  | 3117    | 9.14 | 8.98 | 3121   | 0.02 | 0.52 | 3121      | 0.02 | 0.42 | 3121          | 0.01 | 0.37 |
| A threat to use physical force    | 3117    | 6.52 | 8.46 | 3122   | 0.06 | 0.77 | 3123      | 0.06 | 0.76 | 3119          | 0.04 | 0.71 |

The quantitative findings in Table 1 are consistent with what participants described. For example: “*Every day in the 2018-2019 school year my fellow workers and I were harassed and physically abused. We had a couple students that were very aggressive, and we had to try and deal with them. EVERYDAY!*”

The frequency with which harassment and violence is experienced made identifying and describing the “worst” incident difficult for participants: “*We deal with so many it is not possible to choose one to reflect upon.*” Another participant explained, “*I cannot choose the most significant one. There have been at least three or four that stand out to me. When it requires five adults to restrain a student, who is a threat to themselves and others, then you cannot choose which one of those events is the most significant.*” Indeed, so pervasive is the violence that it has, for some educational assistants, become almost routine: “*As an EA violence in the workplace, I consider part of the job as it occurs regularly.*” Sadly, some participants' experiences of violence are so ubiquitous that violence has become unremarkable: “*It had become such a routine that violence from students no longer stuck out to me as something that shouldn't be happening. I truly thought it was part of my job to accept to put up with this from students.*”

*The simple fact that I go into a classroom every day with 20-28 other children (aged 3-12) watching as I get physically abused should be significant enough. Every day that I finish work and I haven't been kicked, hit, punched, or bitten I consider a fantastic day. Children are literally beating up adults. This is all significant!!! And we are subjecting other children to this violence. Talk about traumatic! (EA)*

## 1.4 Increasing rates

Based on the findings of their longitudinal analysis of Ontario WSIB (Workplace Safety and Insurance Board) lost time claims between 2002 and 2015, Cynthia Chen, Peter Smith, and Cameron Mustard (2019) report that “a pronounced increase in workplace violence injury rates was observed in the education sector with an APC=7.0% (95% CI 5.6% to 8.5%) for women and an APC=4.1% (95% CI 0.9% to 7.4%) for men” (p. 3). They concluded: “When looking into specific industries, we observed an increase in workers’ compensation violence claims from workers in the education sector, compared with the healthcare and other industry groups” (p. 6).

*There has been a decrease in the amount of EAs to a school. We are asked to support multiple students who are entitled to individual EAs. And students who are suspected to have a special need but are not diagnosed will be piggy backed onto a student who has an EA. Sometimes multiple students are placed in one EAs care. This can result in an increase of behaviours and safety concerns. (EA)*

Virtually all classroom-based workers and school support staff participating in the *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Educators (Ontario) Survey* indicated that the levels of harassment and violence have increased in the past ten years, with the majority – around 60% – stating that levels of harassment and violence increased a lot. A further 20% reported that the levels of harassment and violence increased somewhat in the past ten years.

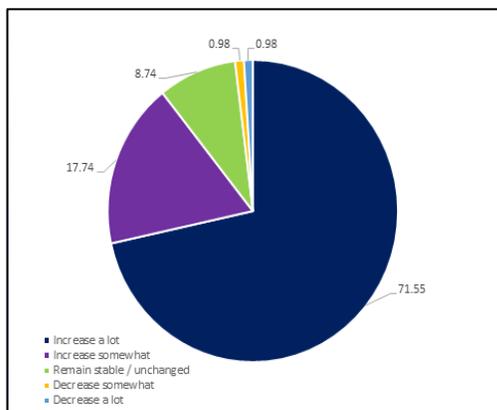


Figure 5a: The levels of harassment and inappropriate behaviour in schools within the last ten years

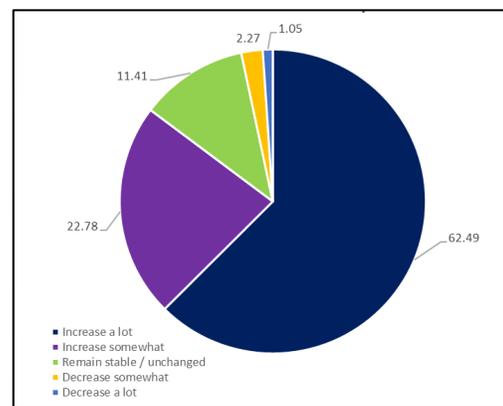


Figure 5b: The levels of violence in schools within the last ten years

*The educational assistant job has drastically changed since beginning my career. It is no longer about academic and physical needs of students. It is strictly behaviour support for all students, identified or not. (EA)*

*We no longer have anything to do with education, as EAs our new role is bodyguard and bouncers. We are only here for behaviours. We have nothing to do with education!! That is not what I signed up for 20 years ago. (EA)*

*I find the level of violence in mainstream classrooms has gone up very much, making EA’s job about working with students with behaviour problems. The students who have learning disabilities have no support at all and are further and further behind [and] often become behavioural students later on. (EA)*

*In the 21 plus years I’ve worked in education the job has become more violent and unpredictable. [...] We are verbally and physically abused daily. We used to be able to use sick days as mental health days to recoup but now we can’t. [...] I’m counting the years to retirement. (EA)*

## 2. Impacts, costs, and coping

*“It has deadened me.” (EA)*

### 2.1 The magnitude of the impact on educators’ health and well-being

The effect of harassment and violence against classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, maintenance) was evaluated in the *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Educators (Ontario) Survey* in a number of ways. We asked participants to estimate the impact of their worst incidents of harassment and violence during the 2018-2019 school year on (a) their physical health, (b) their mental health, (c) the learning environment in their classrooms, and (d) their perceived ability to do their jobs. These questions were designed to estimate the impact of the incident on their functioning in the days and weeks following their experience of harassment and violence. We also asked educators about their physical and mental health in the two weeks prior to completing the survey. This question was designed to provide initial evidence regarding whether an event experienced during the 2018 (Sept) to 2019 (June) school year still exerted an effect on functioning seven or more months later, in February and March 2020, when the survey was conducted.

Table 2: Relationship between health, well-being and the amount of harassment and violence experienced

|  | Total amount of harassment and verbal violence | Total amount of physical violence |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| Harassment negatively affected ... my physical health                        | 0.44***  |                                   |
| Harassment negatively affected ... my mental health                          | 0.45***  |                                   |
| Harassment negatively affected ... my ability to do my job                   | 0.42***  |                                   |
| Harassment negatively affected ... the learning environment of the classroom | 0.41***  |                                   |
| Harassment negatively affected other students in the classroom               | 0.40***  |                                   |
| Violence - affected my physical health                                       |  | 0.51***                           |
| Violence - affected my mental health   |  | 0.50***                           |
| Violence - affected my ability to do my job                                  |  | 0.42***                           |
| Violence negatively affected the learning environment of the classroom       |  | 0.60***                           |
| Violence negatively affected other students in the classroom                 |  | 0.59***                           |
| Overall mental health in the last month?                                     | -0.31***                                       | -0.24**                           |
| Overall physical health in the last month?                                   | -0.25***                                       | -0.20**                           |
| Overall performance at your job over the past year?                          | -0.23***                                       | -0.17**                           |

Note: \*\*\* p < 0.0001; \*\* p < 0.001

The results presented in Table 2 show that the total amount of harassment and verbal violence (e.g., insults, innuendo, disrespect, false accusations, feeling ‘ganged up on’) was correlated with poorer levels of physical and mental health, as well as with lower levels of performance at work and with a diminished learning environment. Similarly, results in Table 2 show that the total amount of physical violence (i.e., attempts, threats, and acts) was again positively correlated with poorer levels of physical health and mental health, as well as with lower levels of performance at work and with a diminished learning environment. These findings suggest that the impact of harassment and violence has lasting effects on mental health, physical health, and job performance. Higher levels of harassment and verbal violence, as well as higher levels of physical violence, were associated with diminished physical health, diminished mental health, and diminished job performance even when assessed some six months after the school year in which the harassment and violence occurred.

*It impacts EVERYTHING! I gave up my life outside of work for years until I hit my breaking point. I started having panic attacks on my lunch break at work and go days without sleeping as I was so worried about work. It broke me. I gave up my social life for my work. I went months without seeing anyone but my coworkers and students. Now I'm on stress leave and I'm even more segregated. I see no one. (DECE)*

## 2.2 Physical and mental health impact

Participants wrote of the devastating impacts harassment and violence had on their mental and physical well-being. Recurring themes included anxiety and panic attacks; general fearfulness, “jumpiness,” and being hyper-aware; depression, hopelessness, and overwhelming sadness; PTSD and flashbacks; an inability to concentrate; and both excessive emotionality and emotional “deadness.” For some, preexisting conditions were exacerbated by workplace experiences: “I already have a depression and anxiety disorder. When I am involved in the de-escalation of a violent student, my anxiety tends to go up.”

Participants who worked in classrooms (e.g., EAs, ECEs) reported somewhat higher mental health effects (19% compared to 15%) and significantly higher physical health effects (11% compared to 5%) than did school support workers.

These physical health effects, which were also noted in Table 2 on page 14, include aches and soreness, injuries ranging from bites to fractures to concussion, stress related health concerns (e.g., headaches, elevated blood pressure), and high rates of insomnia: “I deal with frequent tension headaches, difficulty settling at night as I think about work and residual aches/pains in my knee and back as a result of violent acts from students.”

*A student threw a desk at me and crushed my shin. I have a permanent disability now and can only work 9 hours a week and may not be able to continue working at all. (EA)*

### Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Classroom-based workers and school support staff also completed a checklist of the post-traumatic stress symptoms they experienced following their worst instances of harassment and violence.<sup>2</sup> Results from the survey indicate that 13.5% of EAs would be designated with PTSD following their worst incident of violence in the past year and that 18% of EAs would be designated with PTSD following their worst incident of harassment in the past year. Results in Table 3 show that symptoms of PTSD were associated with lower levels of overall functioning and lower levels of job commitment, as well as a greater number of days off work following both a worst instance of harassment (r=0.43) and a worst instance of violence (r=0.42).

*PTSD! Many times I've left work not being able to clear my head with regards to everything that transpired. Why did this happen? Did I do something wrong? Could I have done anything differently? Your adrenaline is going and then the let down can be very emotional! (EA)*

Table 3: Association between PTSD, Burnout and measures of wellbeing and workplace functioning

|  | Symptoms of PTSD following a worst instance of harassment | Symptoms of PTSD following a worst instance of violence | Total degree of burnout experienced |
|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| Overall wellbeing  | -0.28   | -0.30   | -0.58                               |
| Overall commitment to work                                 | -0.15   | -0.17   | -0.40                               |
| Not able to meet demands of the job                        | 0.15  | 0.20  | 0.48                                |
| Time off work after experiencing an instance of harassment | 0.43  |   | 0.21                                |
| Time off work after experiencing an instance of violence   |   | 0.42  | 0.15                                |

*My negative work experiences impacted every aspect of my life. I struggled with sleeping, anxiety, panic, [and] my stomach would get so bloated from the stress. I was emotional and reactive when I went home, and I was preoccupied with the level of dysfunction that I could not escape from. It impacted my ability to be happy and enjoy life. (EA)*

<sup>2</sup> Participants completed the Short Screening Scale for DSM-IV posttraumatic stress disorder (Breslau, Peterson, Kessler & Schultz, 1999).

## 2.3 Professional costs

Unsurprisingly, participants experienced professional costs because of workplace harassment and violence – costs which exacerbate, and operate in conjuncture with, personal impacts. Some participants noted decreased self-esteem and lack of confidence resulting in “*self-doubt as to my ability to support students.*” Others noted they reflected on the situations – and their response – long after the events occurred: “*Many times I’ve left work not being able to clear my head with regards to everything that transpired. Why did this happen? Did I do something wrong? Could I have done anything differently?*” Given that, as we saw previously, one of the most common forms of harassment was feeling belittled and having one’s professional skills and authority questioned, it is hardly surprising that workers feel undervalued. One respondent specifically described feeling “*totally unappreciated by superiors, parents, [and] some students.*”

*It affects the way I see myself, [it] causes self-doubt and negative self-talk. I have questioned my career choice, explored other options, and thought about leaving education. I take my anger and frustration out on my son sometimes even though it has nothing to do with him. (EA)*

### Occupational Burnout

The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies burnout as an occupational phenomenon (i.e., that exists in the workplace) rather than a medical condition. Burnout is characterized by: (1) Feeling depleted or exhausted at work; (2) Feeling mentally disengaged from one’s job, negative or cynical about one’s job; and (3) Diminished performance and efficacy on the job. Participants wrote about their experience of burnout describing “*dreading going to work,*” feeling “*discouraged,*” losing their “*passion for the job,*” and being “*sad that I don’t love my job as much as I used to.*” Although not a medical condition itself, high levels of burnout can dramatically increase the risk for other disorders, such as clinical depression (Koutsimani, Montgomery & Georgant, 2019).

Results of the survey indicated that one in six classroom-based workers and school support staff were either at elevated risk of burnout (7.21%) or would meet the formal criteria for burnout (7.86%). Results in Table 3 (on page 15) also showed that features of burnout were associated with lower levels of overall functioning and lower levels of job commitment, as well as a greater number of days off work following both a worst instance of harassment ( $r=0.21$ ) and days off work following a worst instance of violence ( $r=0.15$ ). Further analysis showed that the degree of burnout predicted the number of days off work following an instance of harassment, above and beyond any impact of symptoms of PTSD.

Importantly, the qualitative analysis of the data demonstrates that the risk of burnout and disengagement is exacerbated when there is a lack of collegial and administrative respect, support, and acknowledgment, and that this operates alongside rapidly evolving/increasing workplace expectations. Here participants drew attention to “*cuts to staff and greater student needs*” and were deeply frustrated “*with the increased number of needs I feel like I am not able to provide the best for any of the number of students I am expected to support.*” Not surprisingly, notwithstanding their dedication and affection for the children they support, many wrote about looking for other jobs or “*counting the days till retirement.*” In the words of one: “*I used to be passionate about my job and I’m only four years in and already feel like I can’t do this much longer.*”

## 2.4 Economic costs: Days off work and associated costs

In the 2018-2019 *Harassment and Violence against Educators (Ontario) Survey*, classroom-based workers and school support staff were asked if they took time off work because of their worst incident of harassment and/or violence and, if so, how much time. In addition to estimating the number of days individuals are likely to be absent from the school, we were able to estimate the financial costs that would be incurred by a school board to hire a replacement for the day.

Not all classroom-based workers and school support staff who experienced harassment and violence took time off work because of their experiences. Of the 2293 individuals who reported a significant incident of harassment in the 2018-2019 school year, 687 individuals (30%) took time off work. The mean number of days off work for these 687 individuals was 6.34 (SD=7.00). Using the per diem rate of \$185.29,<sup>3</sup> the average cost associated with hiring a replacement for each of these individuals was \$1,175.12 (per incident).

<sup>3</sup> Per diem costs is calculated as the average cost across all 111 collective agreements boards in Ontario. This is based on a mean hourly rate of \$26.47/hour for seven hours a day, for a total of 185.29 per day. This estimate does not include statutory benefit costs (EI, CPP, EHT, WSIB premiums), which would add result in an additional cost of approximately \$19.78 per worker per day.

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Similarly, of the 1,971 individuals who reported a significant incident of physical violence in the 2018-2019 school year, 553 individuals (28%) reported taking time off work. The mean number of days off work was 5.47 (SD=7.32). Using the same per diem rate of \$185.29, the average cost associated with hiring a replacement for each of these individuals is \$1,013.57 (per incident).

Here again, we see that the impact of harassment and physical violence are equitable. Not only, as we saw above, are both harassment and violence associated with diminished mental health, physical health, and performance at work, but the financial costs of both are comparable. Indeed, these results suggest that about one in three classroom-based workers and school support staff who experience harassment or verbal violence and one in four who experience physical violence will take some time off work.

Not all classroom-based workers and school support staff workers who take time off work will be replaced during an absence. Still, these costs are considerable when extrapolated across the entire workforce of classroom-based and school support workers in the province of Ontario. In our survey, 70% of respondents reported that they experienced one or more incidents of violence and 72% reported that they experienced one or more incidents of harassment. While these rates may be higher than the actual rate in the entire population of workers, given that participants were not randomly selected, even if a low rate of harassment and violence is assumed, for example 10% (which is *less than one fifth of the rate reported in this survey*), that would still involve some 10,000 classroom-based workers and school support staff in any given year. If we assume that 30% of those take time off, then 3,000 classroom-based workers and school support staff would be expected to take an average of 6.34 days off work at a cost of \$1,175.12 each amounting to over \$3.5 million dollars annually. It is important to keep in mind that this estimates a very low rate of exposure to harassment and violence and estimates only the costs associated with a *single* incident in any given year.

## 2.5 Personal costs

Survey respondents were asked to describe the impact harassment and violence has on their personal and professional lives. This open-ended question was intended to provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on the effect of workplace harassment and violence as a whole rather than in relation to a single incident. Responses were coded and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Overall, the findings suggest that workplace violence and harassment has significant impacts on the lives of education sector workers. This result was particularly striking for educational assistants, early childhood educators, and others working in the classroom – 87% indicated it had a substantial (and often multifaceted) impact, although this was also the case for 75% clerical, ATV/IT, and maintenance workers.<sup>4</sup>

### Work-life Balance

Exhaustion was the most commonly noted impact for classroom-based workers;<sup>5</sup> indeed, almost one in three (29%) participants spoke of “*extreme fatigue,*” “*feeling tired,*” “*drained,*” “*worn out,*” or simply being “*emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted.*” In real terms, these workers’ ability to engage in social activities is diminished as a result: “*I come home so exhausted from trying to keep one step ahead and making sure the kids that I work with get what they need and that their behaviors do not escalate.*” Importantly, lack of energy interacts with other workplace impacts to further undermine workers’ ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Here we can think, for example, of workers who do “*not feel safe in any surroundings,*” or who are “*embarrassed to go out in public with bruises and marks*” or who are “*very skittish and constantly on guard anticipating that every quick movement around me is someone trying to strike at me.*” And, of course, these effects are exponential – a lack of social interactions results in increased isolation and poorer mental health. Importantly, the ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance is further undermined by a lack of funds which not only restrict the leisure activities that can be purchased and therefore pursued but also means many educational assistants, early childhood educators, and school support workers juggle both familial responsibilities and second jobs: “*Making less than 45,000 a year does not reflect the work I do. This causes stress and anxiety. Every educational assistant I work with is a woman. Every one of us have second and third jobs. We are tired. We are broken. We take the abuse because we are too tired to expect better.*”

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequent rates in this section exclude participants who indicated the workplace had no impact on their personal or professional lives.

<sup>5</sup> Only 7% of school support staff noted exhaustion or fatigue; note that the rate, across groups, was higher from women than for men.

## Family Life

One participant, a clerical worker, noted that: *“What employees experience in the workplace always comes home with them in some form or another and plays out in a variety of ways on his/her psyche which inevitably affects one's personal life.”* It is important to note that the way ‘routine’ harassment and violence ripples into familiar relationships, the lives of workers’ partners, and – most especially – their children, emerged as a distinctly gendered impact of workplace harassment and violence – noted by 24% or almost one in four women, but only one in ten men.

*At the end of the workday, I am beyond exhausted. While at work I am constantly in a state of hyper vigilance staying a step ahead of the students to make sure I and they are safe. I have no energy for my own family. I do not go out with friends. (EA)*

The impacts on family life were diverse. Many participants wrote about coming home not only *“mentally and physically drained”* but also *“grumpy,” “impatient,” “short tempered,” “irritable,” “stressed,”* and *“bitchy.”* Many participants noted that they *“bring the stress home,”* some *“withdraw from the family,”* while others find *“it hard to come home and receive a hug from my spouse, or my kids.”* Indeed, one educational assistant wrote that she *“would flinch when my own child came near me suddenly.”* However, the overwhelming finding was that these workers are, with disconcerting frequency, too sore or too tired *“to do activities with my children,”* distracted, and therefore *“not able to give my children my full attention,”* and so emotionally depleted that they are *“easily irritated with my small children at home.”* This educational assistant described how this plays out: *“My tolerance is low when [my children] cry, or whine. I tend to yell at them, which I then later regret.”* Another explained, *“I keep it together at school. I am always the perfect EA. At home, I am low on patience; my kids don't get the best [of] me. And I am too tired for a personal life.”*

*I have nothing left for my family. I don't feel like engaging with them because of the extremely difficult days of violence and dysregulation in the children that I support. IT IS EXHAUSTING!! I am mentally done! I'm not sure how much longer I can do this job, and I'm only 35. I hate that I have nothing left to give to my own children and husband. My patience is shot, and I just want to be left alone. Its a horrible feeling. (EA)*

Finally, work life spills into personal life when mental injury derails a relationship (*“I am going through a divorce due to PTSD from workplace violence causing flashbacks”*) or, more commonly, when tensions emerge because partners are frustrated with the time spent preparing for the coming work day or recovering from the previous one. Tensions also emerge because partners are irritated by *“me coming home hurt and nothing being done,”* or angered *“by jokes about him causing [bruises].”* The following quotation by an EA captures many of the themes discussed above:

*“I once had a black eye from a student. On the weekends when I was out with my family people saw me and assumed my husband was harming me. For the month it took for the swelling and colouring to go down, my husband would not go out in public with me. And I hid at home because people gave me looks and one person even approached me to tell me I was a bad mom for allowing my children near someone who would hurt me. That month was a huge strain on my family. But on a day-by-day level I find I bring a lot of my work home with me in the form of emotions. If my students have had a particularly hard day I shamefully find that I don't have patience for my own kids at the end of the day, and this puts a strain on my relationship with my own children.”*

## 2.6 Harassment and physical violence have enduring impacts.

As we have already seen, the impact of harassment and physical violence is often similar. Both are associated with diminished mental health, physical health, and performance at work. Subsequent analyses showed that every type of harassment and each type of physical violence was negatively related to overall functioning (i.e., physical health, mental health, and the ability to perform duties at work) months after educators experienced harassment and violence. Specifically, nine different types of harassment and violence, from four different sources (i.e., students, parents, colleagues, and administrators), yielded 36 correlations, all of which were negative, indicating that harassment and physical violence were adversely related to overall functioning; 34 of these correlations were statistically significant. This is an extremely important finding in that it suggests that in terms of impact, some forms of harassment (e.g., put downs) that tend to be frequent, commonplace, and descriptively less severe are as significantly related to health and well-being as descriptively more severe, albeit less frequent, forms of harassment (e.g., false accusations).

## 2.7 Coping

Given the high rates of workplace harassment and violence experienced by classroom-based workers and school support staff, it is vital to reflect on workers' access to services provided by, for example, counsellors and physiotherapists, as well as the importance of having time to heal from a mental and physical workplace injury. On this topic, participants told us that benefits and sick days are woefully inadequate when considered in relation to need. One educational assistant explained: *"We do not have time off and \$300-500 in benefits does not get you very far with a counsellor or physical therapist. And look at what we make. We can not afford to pay for that. And most of us have a part time or a second full time job so that we can survive while continuing to be in this field. Which also inhibits our ability to seek outside support. We love our jobs. We love our students. But we need support!"* Absent such supports, the question becomes, how do these workers cope with workplace harassment and violence? It is to that question we now turn.

*I stopped doing the things I love like cooking and reading. I would rather stay home, I have stopped working out, I am exhausted, I cry all the time, I've gained weight, I am anxious and on edge all the time, I don't sleep well. (EA)*

### **Navigating the impact of violence and harassment: coping in the absence of support**

Survey participants were asked how they coped with workplace harassment and violence and how they endeavoured to mitigate its impact on their personal and professional lives. While some respondents were incredulous, telling us that they *"don't have any [coping strategies]"* and a number noted that crying, while not a strategy per se, did relieve tension, *"I cry. I go to the bathroom and cry. I go home and cry"* others were fatalistic: *"I haven't come up with a coping strategy that's worked so I just pray and hope the next day is better."* That said, as we examine below, education sector workers mobilized on a range of personal and professional resources as they endeavoured to cope with the workplace violence to which they were subjected.

*There are no strategies. If you take time off work you are questioned. If you report the violence the fix is protective equipment. (EA)*

### Workplace tactics and the importance of debriefs.

Unsurprisingly, workers spoke of drawing on their professional skills (e.g., conflict management, relationship building) and training (e.g., NVC, BMS), going for walks, deep breathing, or *"taking a break,"* which, in the context of high demand can necessitate squeezing in time to recentre: *"I often find myself taking a minute to take a quick walk. Since I am always on the floor and have limited break times, I take even a small walk to the bathroom to breathe, splash water on my face, or sit and do some quick breathing techniques."* Some participants use confrontation, while others, whose jobs allow this tactic (e.g., clerical and maintenance workers), practice avoidance: *"I stay behind my desk and out of the way."* Others spoke of the importance of self-talk and reminding themselves about the students' challenges and that *"it's not personal."*

*It's not the violence it's the lack of support, being punished when you ask for a break because emotionally you cannot continue, and your principal doesn't care. Knowing you are replaceable if you don't keep going even though you have had enough. (EA)*

However, by far the most common tactic noted – one that was identified by almost one in three participants (32%) – was debriefing with colleagues (and sometimes administrators, although all too often participants noted that *"debriefs [with the principal] never really happen after a violent incident"*). Participants wrote of the importance of *"talking to coworkers,"* sharing experiences, and *"discussing incidents that have taken place."* These debriefs are more than opportunities to vent (although they are that as well); they are also mechanisms to get advice (*"talk to co-workers after the incident and get different perspectives of what could be done differently and what worked well"*). Perhaps equally importantly, debriefs are a way to receive emotional support from colleagues who *"understand the job."* Several participants noted that the debrief meant, *"I don't take any work baggage home."* Unfortunately, at times, workplace demands and other institutional or interpersonal constraints undermine workers' ability to debrief with trusted co-workers. For example, when mandatory breaks are not given because of staff shortages, workers are denied these moments of collegial support: *"I just keep going. Have to ignore as there is no time to debrief."*

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### Personal strategies

Participants also identified personal strategies. The four most frequently noted, in descending order, were exercise and self-care, turning to friends and/or family for support, therapy and/or medication, and taking a temporary or permanent leave.

- The most commonly identified strategy (identified by 29% of participants) was exercise (e.g., sports, yoga) and self-care. In this context, self-care, often framed as “*taking me time*,” included a range of activities including “*massages*,” “*going for a walk*,” “*meditation*,” “*yoga*,” “*reading*,” “*journaling*,” “*being in nature*,” “*baths*,” and simply “*spending quiet time to decompress*.” Importantly, as we saw above, education workers report high levels of exhaustion and often need to work second (and sometimes third) jobs to make ends meet – this context undermines their ability to proactively implement coping strategies: “*I have tried yoga but can’t find the time to squeeze it in and am too exhausted when I do have the time.*”
- Turning to friends and family for support was noted by 12% of participants. These workers might “*speak with family about any incidents, to get them sorted and put into perspective*” or “*vent to my spouse*.” While evidently an important strategy, workers’ ability to draw on the support of friends and family is undermined not only by concerns about confidentiality, but also by the inability of loved ones to understand the nature of the workplace challenges in the education sector: “*It can weigh heavily on me some days and people in my personal life that aren’t educators do not understand the emotional and mental turmoil I go through sometimes. They just say, ‘I don’t know how you do it’.*” Another participant wrote, “*it takes a special person to do what you do. Nobody really understands but colleagues and there is no time to really connect and debrief with them about matters. We are stretched so thin. It’s go-go-go all day.*”
- Therapy and/or medication – ranging from antidepressants, to anti-anxiety medication, sleep aids, and counselling – was explicitly identified by 8.5% of participants. As previously noted, a number of participants told us that their ability to access mental health supports were restricted. One wrote “*therapy was very helpful. But cannot afford it outside of the five sessions the board provides*,” while another pointed out that access is even more restricted for casual employees who, in most cases, are not eligible for workplace benefits: “*If contracts and casual employees were given benefits, I would seek counselling.*”
- Short or long term or even permanent leaves were the fourth most identified strategy. Most often this entailed “*the use of sick days as mental health days*,” “*stress leave*,” and “*mental health leave due to my health being compromised and being diagnosed with depression and anxiety*.” It also included workers who changed jobs, abandoned their careers, or retired early: “*I felt unsure of being able to protect myself and my vulnerable knee, so I retired. It was a mental change I was not sure I was ready for. I loved my job, I would have preferred to work a couple more years but I felt unsure about keeping myself safe. So, I retired, I miss my job. Cried for hours about my decision but did it for my physical safety.*” Evidently, not only are there direct financial costs (as we saw on pages 16 and 17) related to leaves but when highly skilled and experienced professionals are forced to abandon their careers for their mental and/or physical health, the education system as a whole is impoverished.

Not all strategies deployed were positive. A significant minority of participants identified potentially unhealthy tactics. For example, they wrote about turning to bingeing and over-eating (“*I eat too much and all the wrong foods*”), excessive sleeping, routinely “*zoning out*” by watching copious amounts of television, and drugs and alcohol: “*I go home and drink a lot of wine. Unfortunately, this is my daily routine which I feel is the only way I can handle my stress.*” Another participant noted, speaking to constraints as well as strategies, “*My EA pay is so poor that I have to work two other jobs to pay for my life. I drink a bit and use pot to settle everyday after school.*”

While self-evident, it is nonetheless worth noting that no one should find themselves routinely over-consuming food or alcohol or drugs to cope with the trauma of a job, nor should people be obliged to retire early or abandon a career to safeguard their mental or physical health, nor should they have to “*pursue self-care activities at my own expense in order to be able to show up the next day at work.*” Thinking about these strategies reminds us that there are significant costs (both obvious and obscured) of the violence and harassment to which classroom-based workers and school support staff are ‘routinely’ subjected. These costs ripple through the lives of workers and through the social fabric. Here we can think, for example, what the loss of trained educational sector workers means to students and families – most especially those with complex needs.

### 3. Context: Age and incivility

“There is no respect in the schools anymore from the students and that is very scary!” (EA)

The experience of harassment and violence among classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, maintenance) is extremely heterogeneous. Educational assistants can spend long periods of time working with a small number of students. In contrast, school support workers, such as clerical staff, may see large numbers of students but only for brief periods of time. Further, the type and frequency of harassment and violence by students in elementary school is likely to be very different from the type and frequency of harassment and violence by students in high school. A full understanding of the nature and impact of harassment and violence will require a more fine-grained investigation.

Classroom-based workers and school support staff rarely work with just one age group, although some may spend more time with certain age groups than others. To account for the considerable differences among participants with respect to who they work with, we asked all participants to estimate the amount of time they spend working with students in different grades. Results of analyses examining the relationship between the total amount of harassment and violence and the amount of time spent with students in different grades are presented in Table 4. The data indicate that total amounts of violence and harassment increases when classroom-based workers and school support staff spend greater amounts of time with students in Grades 4 to 8. Results also show that the total amount of violence *increases* with the amount of time spent with students in Grades K to 3, but that total amount of harassment *decreases* with the amount of time spent with students in Grades K to 3. These data indicate that more time spent with students in Grades K to 3 means more physical violence but less harassment. In contrast, more time spent with students in Grades 4 to 8 was related to both more harassment and more physical violence.

Moreover, the research demonstrates that levels of disrespect and incivility in the classroom are positively associated with the total amount of harassment, verbal violence, and physical violence experienced by classroom-based workers and school support staff. In addition to reporting experiences of harassment and violence, participants were also asked to report on the level of incivility among students in their schools, regardless of whether they personally experienced any harassment and/or violence. These questions were designed to evaluate the general school environment in which specific instances of harassment and/or violence are experienced by educators. Results, presented in Table 4, show that the total amount of harassment and physical violence experienced by individual classroom-based workers and school support staff is positively correlated with overall levels of student disrespect and incivility; this finding is consistent with existing scholarship (e.g., Huang, Eddy, & Camp, 2017; Seepage et al., 2013). Our results not only speak to the importance of contextualizing harassment and violence but have important implications for how violence is addressed. Reducing student incivility may mitigate the frequency of harassment and violence against workers in the education sector. This suggests an additional point of intervention that does not rely entirely on curtailing the behaviour of students who are verbally or physically violent at the same time as it raises the possibility that failing to address levels of incivility among students may hamper the effectiveness of other interventions.

Table 4: Relationship between health, well-being and the amount of harassment and violence

|  | Total amount of harassment and verbal violence | Total amount of physical violence |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| School context - Total amount of disrespect, gang activity and theft | 0.39***  | 0.35***                           |
| School context – Degree of disrespect and incivility                 | 0.28***  | 0.42***                           |
| School context – Degree of gang-related behaviour                    | 0.21***  | 0.01                              |
| School context – Degree of theft                                     | 0.38***  | 0.28***                           |

Note: \*\*\* p < 0.0001; \*\* p < 0.001

## 4: Responses and reporting

*“Why does the board ‘normalize’ these incidents? There’s NOTHING NORMAL about going to work every day and getting hit, scratched, kicked, punched, pushed, and having your hair pulled.” (EA)*

### 4.1 Reporting harassment and violence

#### Why not report harassment?

Participants indicated a number of reasons for not telling an administrator about the harassment they experienced. These included: that it was too minor (13.37%), they could handle it on their own (15.07%), they lacked the time due to routine workplace demands (8.02%), or they were embarrassed/did not want the administrator to know (5.78%). They also reported that talking to their administrator was not helpful (17.42%), and that they were uncomfortable talking about these kinds of incidents with their administrator (14.34%).

*The administrator at the time made me feel belittled because of my age. I did not feel supported or comfortable going to admin. (Clerical Worker)*

#### Why not report physical violence?

Reporting physical violence is mandated under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* of Ontario. Indeed, there has been a concerted effort on the part of unions representing educational workers to encourage their members to document workplace violence. Over two thirds (67%) of respondents completed a Safe School, Workplace Violence, or Violent Incident Report for their worst incident of workplace violence. The principal reasons indicated in the pre-existing list for not filling out a form were that the participant judged it to too minor to report (20.92%), lacked time because of either routine workplace demands (18.9%) or because they had to cope with the fallout from the incident (9.31%), were discouraged by the principal or vice-principal (6.59%), and were afraid of either career repercussions (5.87%) or of being criticized or punished (5.30%).

### 4.2 Administrative and Institutional Response to Violence and Harassment

When asked about the administrative response to violence, some respondents wrote about their “*very supportive admin*,” describing principals who are “*responsive*,” who consistently “*check in*” and follow up with debriefs, aid when called upon, ensure “*proper first aid is always administered*,” and help with documenting incidents. Others explained that administrators were at least somewhat supportive and acknowledged the constraints administrators navigate (e.g., lack of human resources, budgetary restrictions). More commonly, however, participants described inaction, normalization, blame, and even reprisals.

#### All too often nothing is done

Many participants explained that their administrators provided minimal or no support – not even debriefs or check-ins: “*I do not feel supported when I get hit. We have no recourse or protection.*” When classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, maintenance) described the institutional response to harassment, most stated that little action was taken. For example, of the survey participants who experienced at least one incident of harassment, only 15% indicated that it was resolved in an appropriate and effective manner, 42% specified that it was not resolved, and an additional 42% reported that it was somewhat resolved. Notably (and perhaps tellingly), almost 70% of respondents indicated that they did mention the incident to an administrator or supervisor, but that they felt “*brushed off*,” that the behaviour was ignored or that there was a lack of serious consequences. One respondent wrote: “*The response was pretty much to sweep it under the rug. The staff did not handle the response correctly. The admin knew about the incident but did nothing about it.*”

*I have brought the issues to my administrator who is aware of the environment that I work in but does NOTHING to improve that environment. It's like talking to a brick wall. (EA)*

## Normalization and blame

Participants wrote that many administrators normalize violence as “*part of the everyday job*” and tell education workers “*that it is [their] job to put up with students’ behaviours and assaults*” explaining that violence is something they simply have to “*deal with.*” Respondents also wrote about administrators who negated the violence (“*it’s a kindergartener how hard can they hit!?*”) and dismiss the harm and trauma engendered by workplace violence. For example, one educational assistant was belittled for crying after a particularly intense and prolonged violent incident: “*both administrators spoke to me separately and told me that I needed to be more professional.*”

*You ask for help or speak to admin only a few times; then you just stop. They are not helpful and ask, “what did you do to set him off.” (ECE)*

Participants also reported being blamed for the violence they experienced. For example, one wrote about “*being asked what I did to provoke the student,*” another was “*questioned as to what I could have done differently,*” and a third was told, “*it was my fault when the student attacked me.*” Moreover, participants wrote about administrators who seemed aggrieved when support was sought or when violence was reported and either subtly or explicitly discouraged the practice. One respondent was told, “*if you were unable to deal with the behavior that we will find other staff to do the job.*”

*If you are too vocal about needing support your given “that” reputation. Everyone wants us to do our “jobs” and shut up. (EA)*

Importantly, the negation of violence, denial of harm, ascription of blame, deployment of punitive measures (“*we felt consequenced for the incidents*”), and the potential removal of employment are significant disincentives for seeking assistance.

## 4.3 Reprisals and reprimands for reporting harassment or violence

Workplace retaliation is any negative response against an employee who was engaging in a legally protected activity (e.g., refusing to provide unsafe work, requesting adherence to occupational health and safety laws, reporting occupational health and safety violations). One in ten educators (10.89%) reported experiencing a reprisal in relation to their worst instance of harassment and one in fifteen (6.27%) in the case of physical violence in the 2018-2019 school year. The high rates of ‘prefer not to answer’ responses (11.96% and 8.20%, respectively) are also worth noting.

The most common reprisal from reporting harassment or violence was professional and career costs, which most frequently included changes to job duties, being removed from roles, assigned undesirable tasks, being given bad references (“*the principal gave a bad reference so that I would not be able to become a permanent employee with the board*”), and involuntary reassignments. One respondent, an educational assistant, described her experience after she reported harassment: “*[I was] moved from a classroom where I had developed relationships with students to a new room. Other educational assistants had to be shuffled as a result and I faced a lot of accusations, ridicule, and blame from them.*” Notably, this form of retribution impacts not only the worker but also the students who are deprived of a trusted educator.

*Punishment [including] being excluded from class trips, from events at the school, having to show up to work earlier than other employees, shunned by principals and ignored unless they needed to address something. Letter written in my HR file. (EA)*

Survey respondents also described being reprimanded either verbally or in writing. Reprimands, at times, resulted in serious professional costs when written reprimands become permanent in workers’ files: “*I was unfairly written up by the principal with no warning, no meeting, not anything! The warning was kept in my file.*” Finally, classroom-based workers and school support staff also detail experiences of being isolated from their colleagues during the workday, knowingly being the subject of rumours, and being excluded from important day-to-day communication at work, all of which creates, or contributes to, a toxic work environment.

*I was punched in the head resulting in a concussion and prolonged brain injury that I’m still suffering from. I tried to explain to my principal that I was experiencing anxiety due to the extreme violence. He told me that it was my job to manage the behaviour of the students and I’d better figure it out. When I started to cry, he said I needed to behave professionally. I was scared to work with the student alone. I was written up for unprofessional behaviour. After that I experienced daily panic attacks and lived in fear. I worked in absolute terror as the principal said three write-ups and I’d lose my job. Eventually I was having panic attacks in class. I had to go on leave and into intense therapy for PTSD. My life will never be the same. (EA)*

## 5: Designated groups: Vulnerability, experiences, and response

*“It is hard to really get a feel for someone yelling in your face, ‘You are a son of a n\*\*\* bitch’.” (EA)*

Results of the survey show that classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, maintenance) experience high rates of harassment and violence and that many experience multiple instances within a single school year. However, the frequency of harassment and violence is highly variable, with some workers experiencing none or just one or two incidents over the year and others experiencing more than 20 in a single year. In this section of the report, we supplement the quantitative data with qualitative findings in order to examine the extent to which vulnerability to harassment and violence is conditioned by intersecting factors. The *Employment Equity Act* defines women, Aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities as designated groups. In this section, we examine how gender, disability, and racialization (the small sample size necessitated collapsing racialized and Indigenous participants into the broader category of BIPOC) impacts vulnerability to, the experience of, and interpersonal/institutional response to workplace harassment and violence in our sample.

### 5.1 Women

Classroom-based workers and school support staff are predominantly women; indeed, 70% of CUPE Education Workers (Ontario) are women, and our rates in this survey were even higher. Of the 3868 individuals who participated in the survey, 88% identified as women. Results of our analyses, depicted in Figures 6a and 6b, showed that women participants reported higher levels of harassment from students and parents, as well as higher levels of violence from students.<sup>6</sup> That women workers in the education sector are disproportionately experiencing violence is consistent with the previously noted findings of Cynthia Chen and her colleagues (2019). These authors, based on their longitudinal study of WSIB claims between 2002 and 2015, concluded: “Increases in rates of violence (as assessed by workers’ compensation claims) were observed for both men and women in the education sector, increases were stronger among female workers than among male workers with the relative risk of workplace violence for women (compared with men) being at least fivefold for the second half of the study time period” (p. 6) (see also Santor, Bruckert, & McBride, 2019). Importantly, gender is not only implicated in rates but also conditions the nature and impact of workplace harassment and violence. We have already seen that harassment is gendered when denigrating language is deployed (e.g., “bitch,” “cunt”) or when sexist remarks are deployed (e.g., “the administrator made a comment about expenses saying because I was a woman I was ‘spending money’”) or when women workers are routinely “disrespected” or “belittled” by colleagues, administrators, or parents based on gender (“I had a co-worker, another EA, in front of students and other co-workers make comments about me being menopausal and how sex would be awkward”).

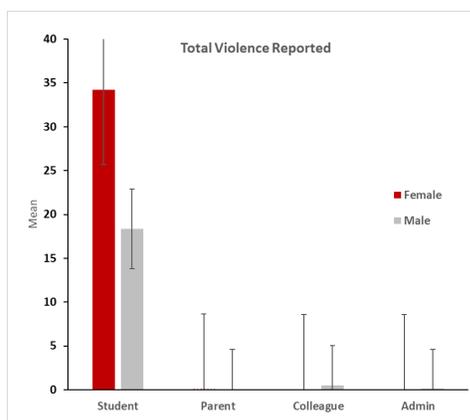


Figure 6a: Mean frequency of total harassment from students and parents was significantly higher in female educational assistants, early childhood educators, and school support staff than in male participants.

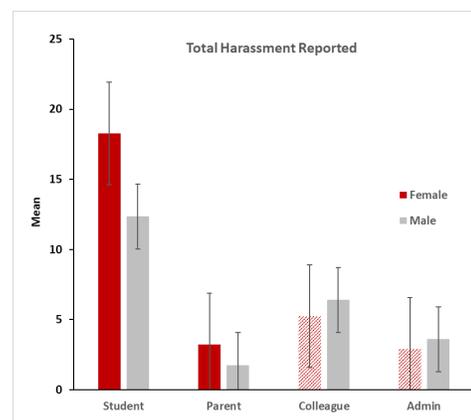


Figure 6b: Mean frequency of total violence from students and colleagues was significantly higher in female educational assistants, early childhood educators, and school support staff than in male participants.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps counterintuitively, when examining the frequency that participants experienced a reprisal for reporting and instance of harassment or violence, our analyses showed that significantly ( $\chi^2=9.34$ ,  $p < .002$ ) more male participants (20%) reported experiencing a reprisal for reporting an instance of harassment than did female participants (12%).

We can also consider that women workers, in general, experience higher levels of workplace sexual harassment than do their male colleagues (Hango & Moyser, 2018). Participants in this survey described a range of behaviour by administrators and colleagues that meets the *Ontario Human Rights Code* definition of sexual harassment: “Engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought to be known to be unwelcome” (10(1)(e)); behaviour that is based on an individual’s sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. For example, one wrote about her administrator greeting her with “*hi sexy girl,*” many described unwelcome and persistent invitations to activities, drinks, and in one case “*skinny dipping.*” Participants described being destabilized by inappropriate looks, gestures, “*comments steeped in double entendre,*” being “*smacked in the butt as I walked by,*” and having their attire and body commented upon. Participants also described sexual harassment from students: “*I was sexually harassed by a male student in grade 8. He drew photos that depicted me in a sexual manner, made several comments about my body, my clothing, posted online that I was a prostitute and a slut.*”

*While blocking one student from attacking peers, who he threatened to kill, he grabbed both my breasts extremely hard [...]. I was very sore and was expected to continue working with him without any consequences or even an apology. Almost like nothing even happened. (EA)*

Several gender differences also emerged with respect to the impact of harassment and violence. In this report, we have already seen that, compared to their male counterparts, women report more overtime work, higher workload increases, less ability to meet workplace demands, and greater familiar impacts. As we see in Figure 7, female classroom-based workers and school support staff, represented with a solid red bar, reported lower levels of functioning and lower levels of commitment than male workers and staff, represented with the solid gray bar. Female participants also reported higher levels of workplace burnout and more symptoms of PTSD following their worse instance of harassment than men. Interestingly, no gender differences were observed with respect to the number of days taken off work following the worst instance of harassment or violence.

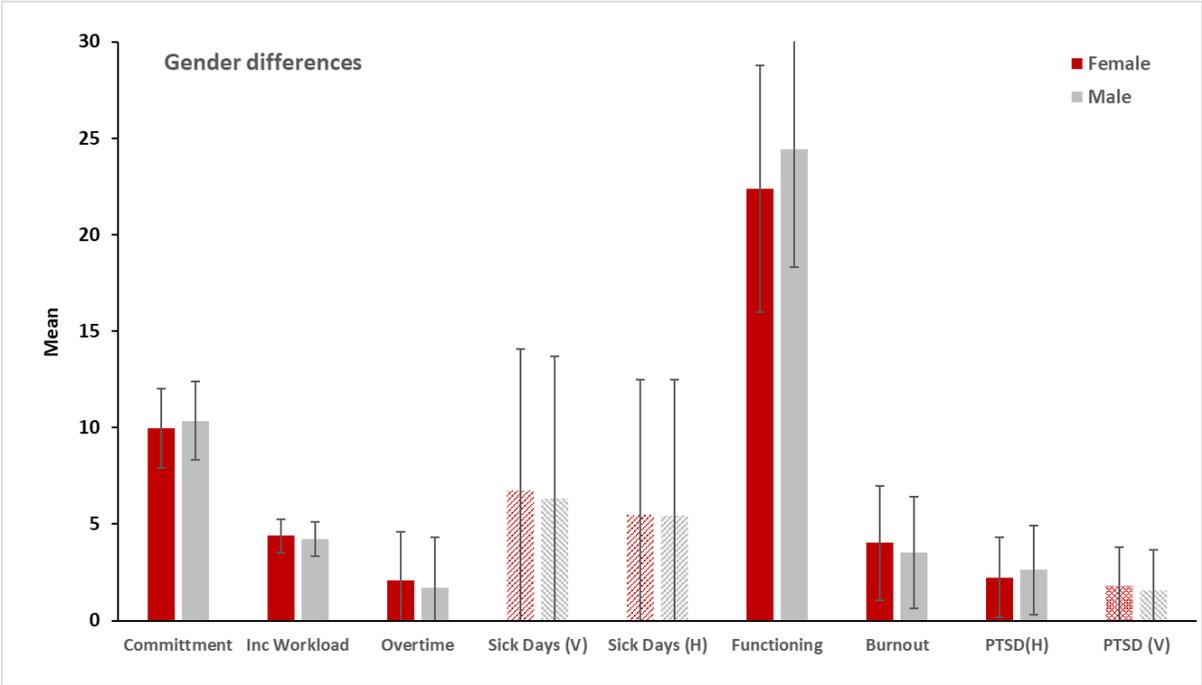


Figure 7: Mean scores for men and women on a variety of measures of impact. Significant group differences are depicted with solid bars. No differences were observed for mean number of sick days following an instance of harassment or severity of PTSD symptoms following an instance of violence.

## 5.2 Individuals who identify as having a disability

Of the 3868 individuals who participated in the *2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey*, 6.5% identified as having a disability. Results of our analyses, depicted in Figure 8, showed while no statistically significant differences were found in the frequency of harassment or physical violence from students or parents, participants identifying as having a disability reported significantly higher levels of harassment from colleagues and administrators. Turning to the qualitative data, we see that workers who identify as having a disability described being disbelieved, disrespected, and humiliated about their disability by colleagues and administrators. One reported that she was “teased about [her] inability to hear,” another wrote of overhearing “staff saying that I was every principal’s worst nightmare – staff who are at work who can’t do their jobs,” and a third reported that upon her return to work following a two week mental health leave she was “harassed by a principal about the reason for the leave even though it was supported by medical documentation.” Notably, workers experience bias and ableism even when the disability was the result of physical and/or mental injuries sustained in the workplace. One worker told us: “[My] principal ridiculed my anxiety and PTSD from a work-related injury. She laughed about it and spoke to other staff. Complained about accommodating me and caused tension with other staff as their duties changed due to my accommodations.” In other words, workers who acquire an injury at work are sometimes subsequently harassed and demeaned because of that injury.

*My administrator laughed at me as I tried to run to my 5th CPI [non-violent crisis intervention] call while wearing 2 supportive knee braces. I asked for his assistance and he laughed and walked away. (EA)*

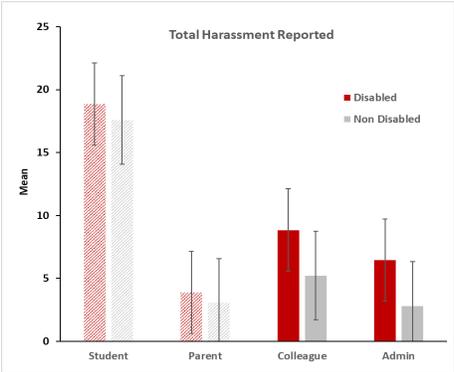


Figure 8: Mean frequency of total harassment from colleagues and administrators was significantly higher in educational assistants, early childhood educators, and school support who identify as having a disability than in those who do not.

Given the elevated levels of harassment from administrators noted previously (see page 12), it is perhaps unsurprising that reprisals for reporting harassment is significantly ( $\chi^2=19.27, p < .0001$ ) higher for participants who identified as having a disability than it is for those who did not identify as having a disability (see Figure 8 above). Here participants spoke of, for example, being reassigned even when accommodations had been successfully applied in the past. One participant described being given assignments that “did not meet my restrictions. I was put in classes that specifically would further damage my health.” Another wrote: “I was also yelled at by a principal in front of others for asking them to recognize and enforce my disability accommodation.”

A number of differences also emerged with respect to the impact of harassment and violence. As shown in Figure 9 on page 27, classroom-based workers and school support staff who identify as having a disability reported lower levels of functioning and of commitment and higher levels of burnout and PTSD symptoms following instances of harassment and violence than participants who do not identify as having a disability. Although both groups of individuals report increases in workloads and overtime, no significant differences were found with respect to increases in workload or overtime.

*I considered a change in career because I was made to feel like my disability means I am an unreliable educator. (EA)*

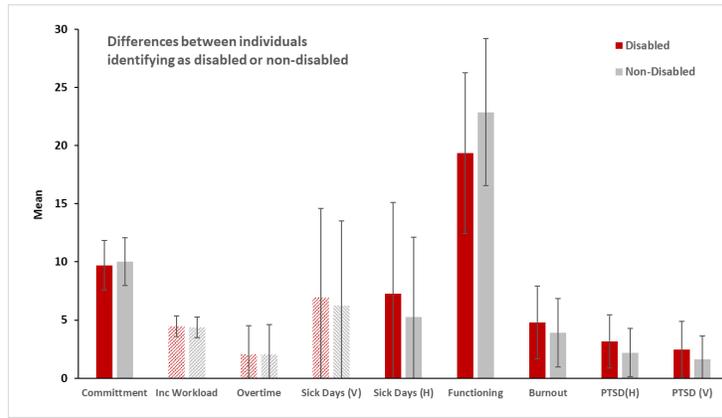


Figure 9: Mean scores for men and women on a variety of measures of impact. Significant group differences are depicted with solid bars. No differences were observed for mean number of sick days following an instance of violence, mean increase in workload or mean increase in overtime.

*My admin has asked my teaching partner about my abilities when I am not present and continues to ask me to talk to her about the details. I prefer to preserve my dignity and only share the details with folks who I feel will not hold it against me and the folks who I am with every day so they can help keep me safe in medical emergencies. (ECE)*

## 5.4 BIPOC workers

Classroom-based workers and school support staff in our sample were predominantly white. Of the individuals who identified their racial identity (12% of respondents preferred not to answer the question), 7.42% of the entire sample of participants identified as belonging to one of a number of racialized groups, including Asian (2.8%), Black (1.8%), Middle Eastern (0.81%) or Latin American (0.7%); only 1.3% of our sample identified as Indigenous. As previously noted, the small sample size necessitated combining these individuals into a single group of BIPOC. Results showed that racialized and non-racialized classroom-based workers and school support staff experience similar levels of harassment and violence from parents, colleagues, and administrators and that the occurrence of violence was rare, but that non-racialized classroom-based workers and school support staff reported higher levels of harassment and violence from students than did racialized individuals.

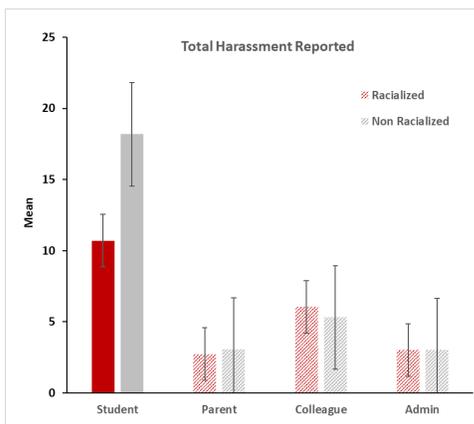


Figure 10a: Mean frequency of total harassment from students and was significantly lower in racialized educational assistants, early childhood educators, and school support staff.

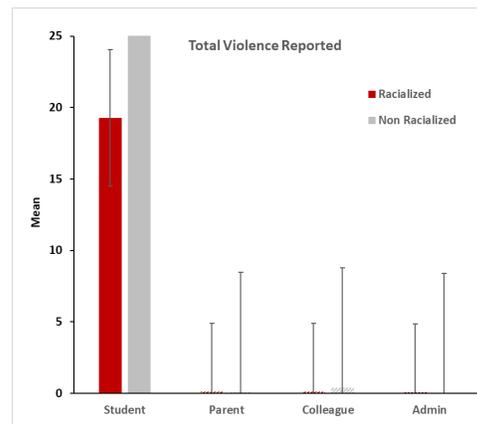


Figure 10b: Mean frequency of total violence from students and was significantly lower in racialized educational assistants, early childhood educators, and school support staff.

We examined a number of factors that may have masked any effects for the group of racialized participants, such as a difference in the age or region in which racialized participants responded to the survey or in the extent to which racialized participants, who reported a slightly lower frequency of harassment and violence, compared to non-racialized participants. Results showed, for example, that frequency of harassment and violence was highest in educational assistants and early childhood educators who work with students in grades 4 to 8 and lower in school support staff who do not work directly with students in the classroom. If, for example, participants in the current study, who are from racialized groups, were also overrepresented in the group of participants who did not work with students in grades 4 to 8 or in the group of participants who serve as support staff to a school and do not work directly with students in the classroom, then overall rates would be lower. Even after accounting for these additional factors, the group differences between racialized and non-racialized participants remained.

These results need to be interpreted with caution. The sample of racialized workers is small and may well not be representative of the experiences of racialized classroom-based workers and school support staff in Ontario. Moreover, quantitative data fails to consider the way bias, racism, and Islamophobia permeate the harassment and violence that workers experience, the way the harassment is rooted in racist tropes, and the extent to which racism informs the nature of the harassment. One participant spoke of overhearing “*staff using the term ‘n\*\*\*\*\*’ in the main office and laughing, stating all of them are lazy and worthless. The principal did not discipline any of the members of the conversation, even though he was privy to the conversation.*” Another participant’s concerns about workplace protocols were not only dismissed, but she was disparaged: “*A teacher and I were not in agreement about an issue, and she stated, ‘maybe in your culture you like to lie’.*” One participant wrote, “*my teaching partner was telling the all the students to correct my pronunciation which is not wrong but spoken with a Vietnamese accent.*” One Black EA explained that her ability to challenge policies is undermined by racial stereotypes: “*No matter what the situation is I am automatically in the wrong because I’m Black and stereotyped as being aggressive if I disagree with someone.*” We can also think of the impact of verbal violence that includes racial slurs (e.g., the N-word), the ubiquity of microaggressions, and the targeting of symbols of ‘otherness’: “*A student tried to pull on my hijab from the back chocking while I was engaged in teaching another student. When the teacher tried to get him off, he tried to scratch and bite both her and me. He also tried to insert his hand under my shirt to scratch me.*” (EA)

Importantly, BIPOC participants experienced *higher* rates of reprisals for reporting instances of harassment or violence. Indeed, significantly ( $\chi^2=3.78, p=.05$ ) more BIPOC participants (17.92%) experienced a reprisal for reporting an instance of harassment than participants who did not identify as racialized (11.61%). Although more racialized participants (9.00%) reported experiencing a reprisal for reporting an instance of violence than participants identifying as non-racialized (6.08%), this difference was not statistically significant (see Figure 11). Without further interviews, we do not know why racialized workers are disproportionately sanctioned for reporting harassment and violence; however, examining other workplaces suggests structural and interpersonal racism as well as implicit bias are factors (see, for example, Lambert & McInturff, 2016).

*No support from admin instead I was blamed until the truth came out. Even though other staff was speaking out, the principal didn’t ask me but blamed me and was surprised when I went back to her to explain myself. I guess because I was a casual staff and minority.* (EA)

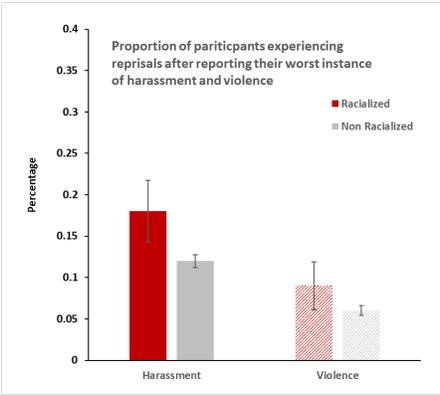


Figure 11: Proportion of racialized and non-racialized participants reporting reprisals following a worst instance of harassment and violence.

A number of group differences also emerged with respect to the impact of harassment and violence (see Figure 12). BIPOC classroom-based and school support staff reported higher levels of commitment and functioning. Surprisingly, while BIPOC participants reported more symptoms of PTSD following their worse instance of harassment and greater increases in overtime relative to non-racialized participants, they also reported lower levels of burnout. No differences between BIPOC and non-BIPOC participants in terms of days off work following an instance of harassment or violence were observed.

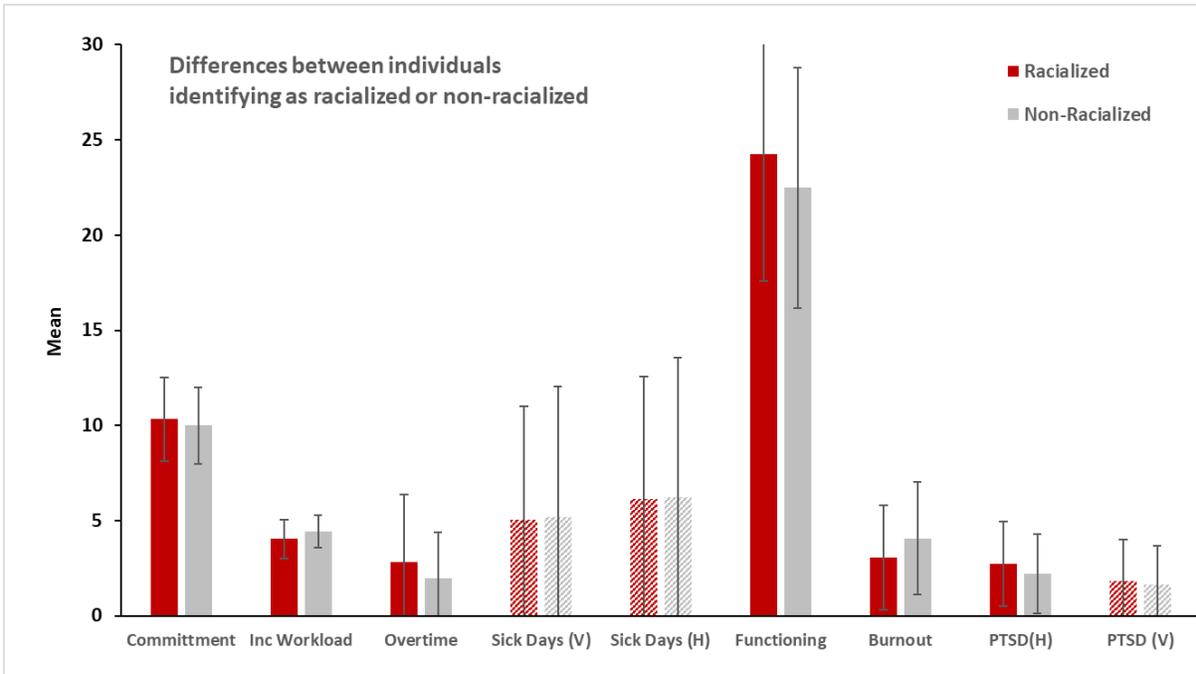


Figure 12: Mean scores for racialized and non-racialized participants on a variety of measures of impact. Significant group differences are depicted with solid bars. No differences were observed for mean number of sick days following an instance of violence or harassment, as well as for mean number of symptoms of PTSD following an instance of violence.

## 5.4 LGBTQ+

Notwithstanding that the LGBTQ+ community is not identified as a designated group in the *Employment Equity Act*, given the pervasiveness of homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity, it is nonetheless important to consider the experience of sexual and gender minorities. In the current study, 94 individuals identified as LGBTQ+. No significant difference between classroom-based and school support staff who do and do not identify as LGBTQ+ were found. This finding may be attributable to the relatively small number of participants or the fact that sexual orientation or gender identity may not be shared with students, colleagues, administrators, or parents in the workplace. That said, participants did write about their discomfort with homophobic and transphobic statements and the failure of administrators to act. One educational assistant who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community wrote: *“A group of students condemned gay people and said they had no business being around, no business adopting children, and that they have a serious mental illness. Other teachers heard this as well. Issue was brought to administration. Nothing was done. In fact, one of the children was actually made valedictorian of the graduating class. I declined attending the graduation because of this incident.”*

## 6: Comparison of classroom-based and school support workers

*“All professionals have skills to bring, and a team approach works best in schools today.” (EA)*

The 2018-2019 *Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey* involved both classroom-based (i.e., designated early childhood educators, educational assistants, instructors, professional/paraprofessional, library workers, and student supervisors) and school support staff (i.e., clerical/admin, custodial/caretaking/cleaning, food service worker, IT/AV support, maintenance/trade, and warehouse/driver). In this section, we report the results of analyses that compared the frequency of harassment and violence experienced by these two sets of workers. However, because many workers hold more than one position, any direct comparison was difficult. To facilitate the comparison, we removed any participant who did not belong exclusively to one of these two groups. Accordingly, 2960 participants were included in the classroom-based group, and 709 participants were included in the support staff group.

### 6.1 Frequency of harassment and violence

Results of analyses comparing classroom-based versus school support staff participants are presented below in Figure 13. These results show that classroom-based participants report more frequent harassment from students than do school support staff. However, results also show that support staff report higher levels of harassment from parents and administrators than do classroom-based participants.

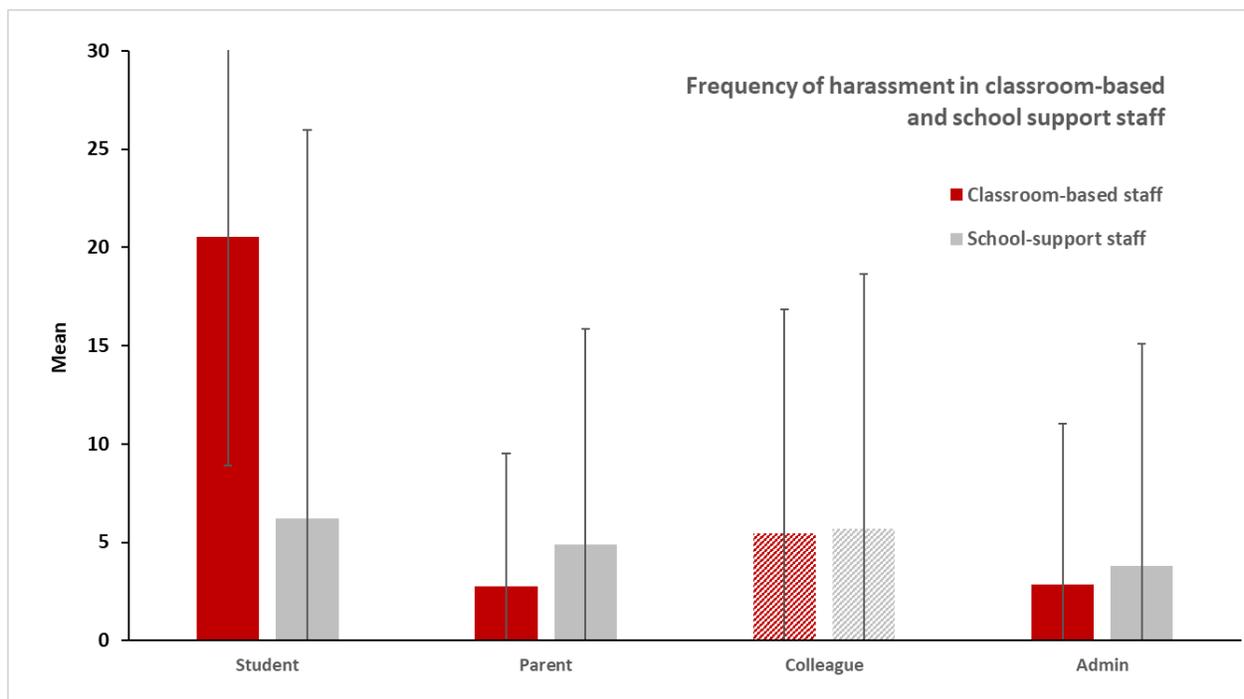


Figure 13: Frequency of harassment and physical violence reported by classroom-based versus school support staff participants from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

Results of analyses examining the frequency of violence reported among both classroom-based participants and school support staff are reported in Figure 14. These findings show that classroom-based workers reported more violence from students than did school support participants, but that school support staff reported significantly more violence from colleagues than classroom-based participants. It is worth noting that although more violence from parents and administrators was reported by support staff than classroom-based participants, these differences were not statistically significant due in part to the small number of participants reporting violence from parents, colleagues, and administrators.

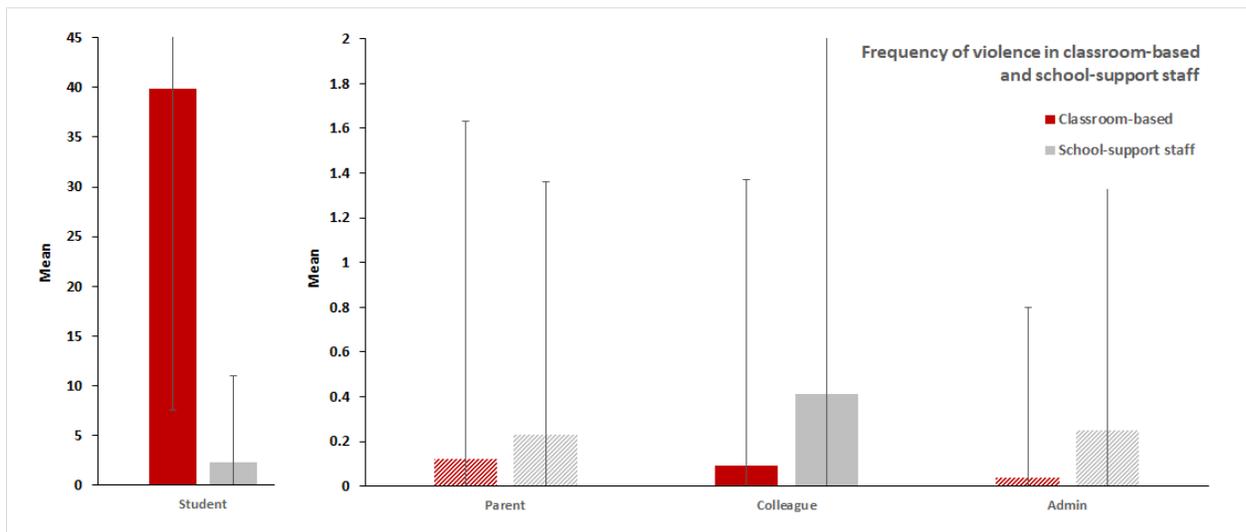


Figure 14: Frequency of harassment and physical violence reported by classroom-based versus support staff from students, parents, colleagues, and administrators.

## 6.2 Functioning of classroom-based workers and support staff

We also compared the frequency of symptoms of PTSD and burnout between classroom-based workers and support staff, as well as differences between the two groups of participants with respect to overall functioning, commitment, workload increases, and the number of days off due to their worst incident of harassment and violence. Results are presented in Table 5. In general, classroom-based participants reported a greater number of PTSD symptoms following their worst instance of harassment and a greater number of burnout symptoms than did support staff. Classroom-based participants also reported greater increases in workloads and overtime than did support staff. No differences were found with respect to the number of days taken off work following their worst instance of harassment or violence and there was no difference in the severity of PTSD symptoms following their worst instance of violence.

Table 5: Levels of functioning in classroom-based versus school-support workers

|                                    | Classroom-based workers |      |      | School-support workers |       |      | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|------|------|------------------------|-------|------|----------|----------|
|                                    | N                       | M    | SD   | N                      | M     | SD   |          |          |
| Overall functioning                | 2757                    | 3.78 | 2.39 | 615                    | 5.27  | 0.10 | 13.96    | .0001    |
| Commitment                         | 2259                    | 9.96 | 2.03 | 547                    | 10.20 | 2.15 | 2.50     | .01      |
| Burnout                            | 2243                    | 4.13 | 2.91 | 537                    | 3.43  | 3.08 | 4.75     | .0001    |
| PTSD Symptoms following violence   | 1721                    | 1.69 | 2.02 | 134                    | 1.99  | 2.26 | 1.66     | ns       |
| PTSD Symptoms following harassment | 1805                    | 2.24 | 2.09 | 310                    | 2.51  | 2.16 | 2.09     | .04      |
| Not Meeting Demands                | 2258                    | 2.27 | 1.07 | 547                    | 1.94  | 1.06 | 6.48     | .0001    |
| Increased Workloads                | 2092                    | 4.42 | 0.87 | 493                    | 4.27  | 0.91 | 3.35     | .001     |
| Overtime                           | 2257                    | 2.07 | 2.55 | 547                    | 1.73  | 2.44 | 2.84     | .01      |
| Days off due to harassment         | 562                     | 6.41 | 7.38 | 84                     | 5.60  | 6.51 | 0.95     | ns       |
| Days off due to violence           | 482                     | 5.28 | 6.81 | 29                     | 6.97  | 8.29 | 1.28     | ns       |

## 7. Readiness and training

*“We don't have the qualifications or the tools to deal with the situations we deal with on a day-to-day basis.” (EA)*

### Readiness

In the 2018-2019 *Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey*, we asked participants about their level of preparedness in dealing with instances of harassment and violence. Results, presented in Figures 15a and 15b, show that over half of participants indicated that they had a little (23.61%) or no training (32.13%) to deal with instances of harassment and that about one third of participants have had a little (13.57%) or no training (30.28%) to deal with instances of violence.

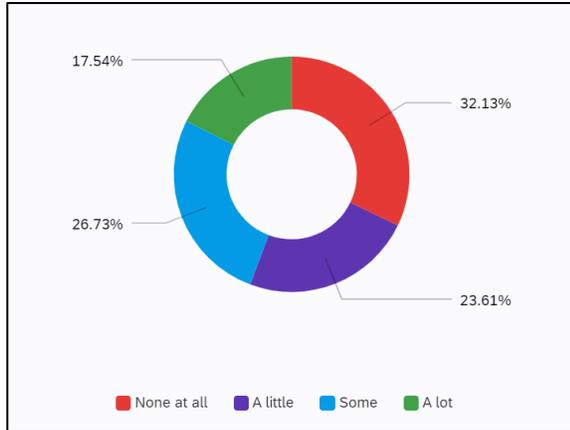


Figure 15a: Percentage of participants who have different degrees of training to deal with instances of harassment.

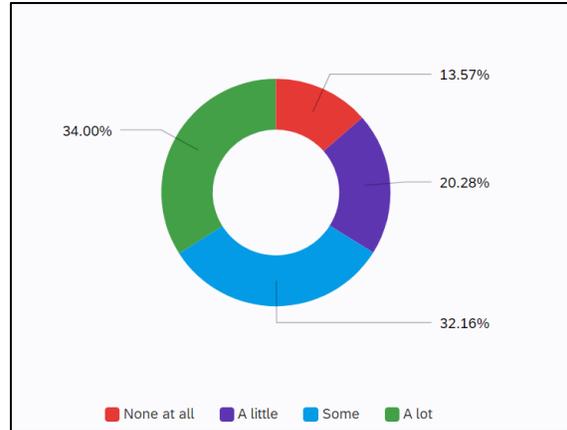


Figure 15b: Percentage of participants who have different degrees of training to deal with instances of violence.

*I use all of the training the Board has repeatedly provided. I use it every day. Often, if there is nothing I can do, I report the incident and leave it. I am not listened to, cared for, or protected. After being harmed I am blamed by administration for the subsequent illness. (EA)*

### Training

We also surveyed participants with respect to what type of training they had already received and the types of training they would like to acquire. Results are presented in Figure 16, only for participants who indicated that they were classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, early childhood educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, maintenance). Results show that although most classroom-based workers have received many different types of training, including (a) non-physical techniques to manage harassment, (b) non-physical techniques to manage violence, and (c) training and guidance on how to intervene physically, more than 30% of classroom-based workers have not received this kind of training, the majority of which indicated they would like to complete such training.

Results of the survey also showed that almost 50% of classroom-based workers wished to acquire training in how to teach students social-emotional skills (SEL) to manage frustration and anger. Again, almost 60% of participants would like to acquire Nonviolent Crisis Intervention Training but have not yet done so. For all types of training, the percentage of participants unaware of the various types of programs was generally small.

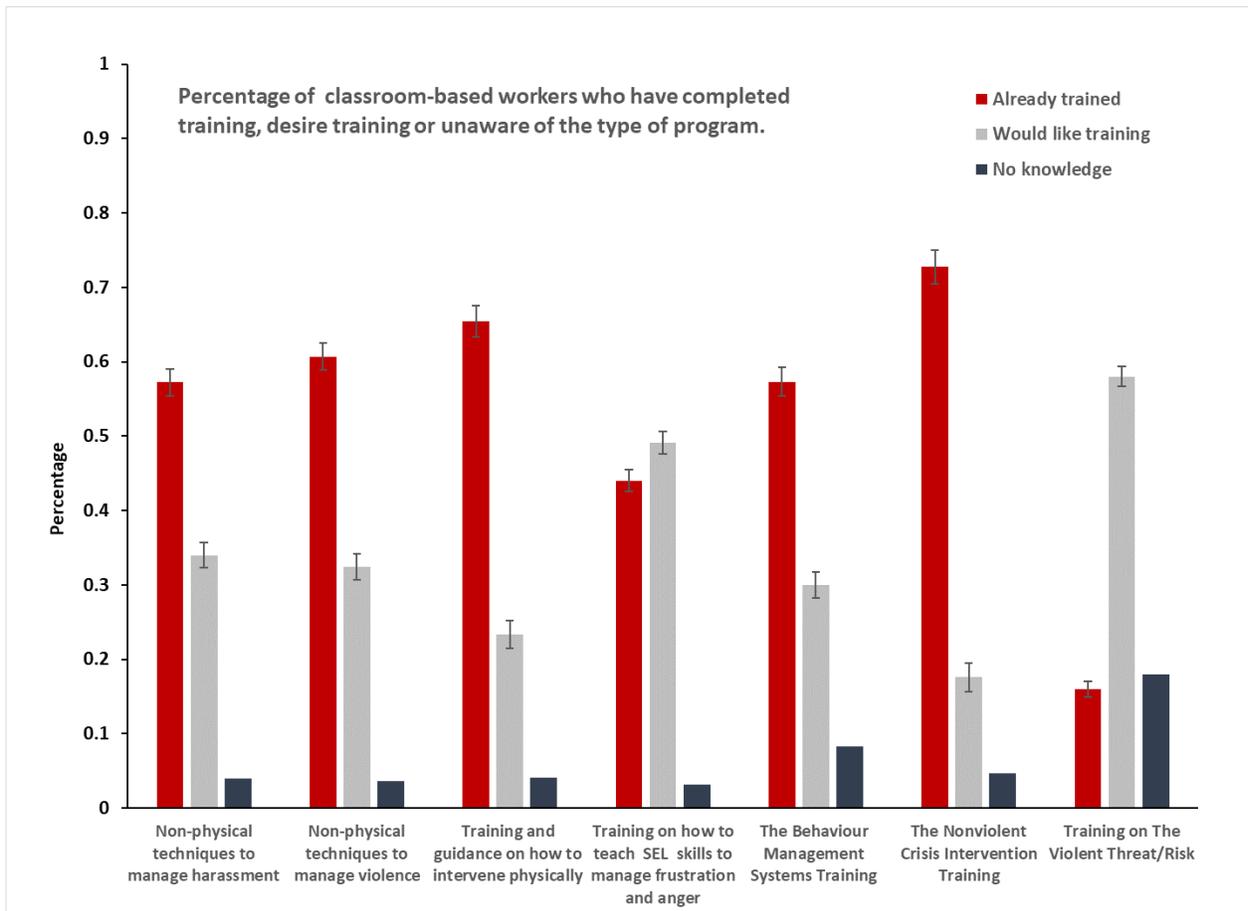


Figure 16: Percentage of participants who already have different types of training or wish to receive different types of training.

Although the level of training and degree of readiness is an important issue to consider in understanding the complexity of the harassment and violence experienced by classroom-based workers and school support staff, no amount of training or readiness will eliminate the frequency of harassment and violence and the impact that harassment and violence has on individuals in the workplace. Indeed, focusing on just the issue of training and readiness would be overly simplistic, ignoring the multitude of social, economic, physical, and mental health issues that affect the likelihood that individual students initiate harmful behaviour. Moreover, a narrative of “more training” risks not only individualizing the complex interlocking issues but also risks obscuring the need to address the systemic factors that are at the root of harassment and violence educators sector workers’ experience.

*The school board should stop pretending like "more training" is going to fix this. We are made to feel like being abused is our job and its our fault if we get hurt. (EA)*

*The School Boards need to acknowledge the violence and develop a plan. Having a policy that is NEVER enforced is not working. (EA)*

## Conclusion: The inescapability of workplace violence

*“Why are we made to feel that it is part of our job to accept violence?  
I don't see too many jobs around that would accept what we go through.” (EA)*

The 2018-2019 Harassment and Violence against Education Workers (Ontario) Survey documents an epidemic of harassment and violence among classroom-based workers (e.g., educational assistants, designated early childhood Educators) and school support staff (e.g., clerical, custodial, IT and maintenance staff) in Ontario’s elementary and secondary school system. There are a number of issues that warrant immediate attention.

First, results from the survey suggest that in any single year, as many as 89% of classroom-based and support staff workers will experience an act, attempt or threat of violence and that 95% will experience some form of harassment. These are extraordinarily high rates and are among the highest among any labour market sector. Findings for physical violence reported in the current study are consistent with rates of workplace violence events reported to and monitored by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB).

The twenty occupations reporting the greatest number of workplace violence events resulting in time off work due to injury are reported (in Table 6) for 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020.<sup>7</sup> These results show that, in 2014, 2016, and 2018, more instances of physical violence resulting in time off work due to injury were reported to WSIB by teaching assistants in elementary and secondary school than any other group of PSHSA<sup>8</sup> sector employees; these rates are also considerably higher than in sectors generally assumed to be dangerous, such as law enforcement and corrections.

*I am usually able to de-escalate a situation before it gets out of control. Having said that, I am only able to de-escalate a student or prevent an aggressive episode when the appropriate supports are put into place. When we [the staff] are stretched between students then we are unable to provide the support needed to keep students actively engaged, appropriately challenged, and in control of their behaviours. (EA)*

Only in 2020 (when in-person teaching was restricted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic) did teaching assistants in elementary and secondary school not report the greatest number of instances of physical violence resulting in time off work due to injury (perhaps unsurprisingly, another occupational group of predominantly women workers – nurse’s aides and orderlies – had the highest rates in that year).

Table 6: The top twenty highest count of workplace violence events resulting lost time due to injury in 2014, 2016, 2018 and 2020.

| Occupations  | 2014 | 2016 | 2018 | 2020 |
|--|------|------|------|------|
| ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER ASSISTANTS           | 273  | 397  | 665  | 318  |
| POLICE OFFICERS (EXCEPT COMMISSIONED)                        | 269  | 284  | 354  | 327  |
| NURSE AIDES AND ORDERLIES                                    | 236  | 279  | 318  | 389  |
| COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS                         | 197  | 293  | 252  | 177  |
| CORRECTIONAL SERVICE OFFICERS                                | 145  | 191  | 367  | 169  |
| REGISTERED NURSES  | 150  | 158  | 258  | 218  |
| ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AND KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS                  | 87   | 145  | 268  | 123  |
| BUS DRIVERS AND SUBWAY AND OTHER TRANSIT OPERATORS           | 65   | 100  | 168  | 121  |
| REGISTERED NURSING ASSISTANTS                                | 84   | 99   | 48   | 135  |
| OTHER AIDES AND ASSISTANTS IN SUPPORT OF HEALTH SERVICES     | 21   | 16   | 218  | 71   |
| AMBULANCE ATTENDANTS AND OTHER PARAMEDICAL OCCUPATIONS       | 31   | 50   | 66   | 66   |
| EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS                                    | 25   | 45   | 55   | 29   |
| FAMILY, MARRIAGE AND OTHER RELATED COUNSELLORS               | 24   | 34   | 54   | 35   |
| SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS                                    | 33   | 30   | 59   | 22   |
| SOCIAL WORKERS   | 12   | 20   | 50   | 46   |
| SECURITY GUARDS AND RELATED OCCUPATIONS                      | 12   | 13   | 47   | 37   |
| SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND ADMINISTRATORS OF ELEMENTARY AND SECON | 14   | 23   | 37   | 22   |
| VISITING HOMEOWNERS, HOUSEKEEPERS AND RELATED OCCUPATIONS    | 30   | 30   | 19   | 1    |
| BY-LAW ENFORCEMENT AND OTHER REGULATORY OFFICERS, N.E.C.     | 8    | 10   | 18   | 10   |
| PROBATION AND PAROLE OFFICERS AND RELATED OCCUPATIONS        | 17   | 12   | 7    | 6    |

Data Source: The Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) Enterprise Information Warehouse (EIW) Claim Cost Analysis Schema, April 2021 data snapshot for all years.

<sup>7</sup> Data provide by Public Services Health & Safety Association: Data Source: The Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) Enterprise Information Warehouse (EIW) Claim Cost Analysis Schema, April 2021 data snapshot for all years.

<sup>8</sup> Public Service Health and Safety Association

Second, the frequency at which violence and harassment was reported over a single school year was also extremely high. Classroom-based and support staff workers reported an average of 26.51 instances of all types of harassment per year from students and an average of 24.39 instances of acts, attempts or threats of violence. It is worth noting that the pay classroom-based workers and schools support staff receive does not reflect the workplace risks they navigate. For example, the starting salary for police officers in Ottawa – a job that continues to be male dominated – is \$68,285.86,<sup>9</sup> while the starting salary for educational assistants – predominantly women – is roughly half that amount. As a result, educational assistants are not only facing unprecedented levels of harassment and violence but are often obliged to work second and even third jobs. In real terms this hinders their ability to recuperate and exacerbates personal and social costs. Moreover, speaking to societal costs, low wages combined with adverse working conditions can result in difficulty recruiting and retaining quality staff and ensuring adequate numbers of supply/casual staff.

*Respect support staff as professionals and pay them a decent salary. Many of us must work two, or more jobs to make ends meet. So you will lose us [...]. My job is not easy, and it is needed. I should make around what a plumber or electrician would make. (EA)*

Third, there is a disturbing normalization of violence against education sector workers by administrators, educators, and students; all too often it appears that violence is increasingly understood to be “*part of the job.*” The impact of the normalization of violence against predominantly women workers on students is, to the best of our knowledge, unresearched, however, educators are certainly raising flags: “*We as EA’s are victims of violence. And we teach each other – and the children that we work with – to stand silently by and become victims.*” This normalization operates in conjuncture with widespread minimization and/or denial of the extent of violence and its multifaceted impacts on both classroom-based workers and school support staff.

Fourth, results from the current survey indicate that classroom-based and support staff workers report elevated levels of mental health difficulties, burnout, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder following the experience of harassment and violence, all of which were related to lower levels of overall wellbeing and workplace commitment, as well as greater difficulties meeting job demands and high rates of time off work. Indeed, our findings suggest that 13.5% of EAs would be designated with PTSD following their worst incident of violence in the past year and that 18% of EAs would be designated with PTSD following their worst incident of harassment in the past year. The proportion of individuals designated as having PTSD, after one instance of harassment or violence, was equitable to rates reported by firefighters and public safety call centre operators.<sup>10</sup> Results of the survey also indicate that approximately one in six classroom-based workers and school support staff were either at imminent risk of burnout (7.21%) or would meet the formal criteria for burnout (7.86%).

Fifth, the high rates of harassment and violence experienced by classroom-based and support staff workers speak to the need for urgent intervention. The National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (CSA Group, 2013) was introduced in Canada in 2013 to address the increasing social and economic costs of mental health difficulties in the workplace. The National Standard defined, for the first time, the characteristics of a healthy workplace and the types of workplace hazards that could be expected to undermine the mental health of employees. The Standard defined a “psychologically healthy and safe workplace” as one that “promotes workers’ psychological wellbeing and actively works to prevent harm to worker psychological health, including in negligent, reckless or intentional ways” (CSA Group, 2013, n.p.). The voluntary policy was intended to provide guidance to employers and unions on how to identify, assess, and control psychological hazards in the workplace and on how to foster and promote psychological health and safety amongst employees (CSA Group, 2013). Considering the high rates of harassment and violence experienced by classroom-based workers and support staff it is reasonable to expect that most employees are likely to suffer a mental injury of some kind, at some point, during their employment. Given the impact that harassment and violence have on the health and wellbeing, both immediately and over the long-term, adequate resources (e.g., access to mental health professionals) are essential to ensure that all staff who have experienced harassment and violence have the opportunity to address any mental or physical injury that they have sustained, as well as to acquire the skills needed to cope with ongoing exposure to harassment and violence.

*I have had seven years of intensive psychological therapy (twice a week) due to PTSD brought on by the workplace. I have finally developed functioning coping skills. I remain in this job because it’s the highest paying in my field of work although I only make \$ 40,000 a year. (EA)*

<sup>9</sup> Ottawa Police Service: salary and benefits; <https://www.ottawapolice.ca/en/careers-and-opportunities/sworn-salary-and-benefits.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> Studies examining the rate of PTSD in firefighters have found rates of PTSD ranging from 13% to 18% 1–4 years following large-scale response events (Benedek, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2007; Carleton, Afifi, Turner et al., 2012).

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Finally, the job that education sector workers – and particularly EAs – are doing has changed dramatically. A truly inclusive education system needs to be able to respond to students’ complex needs. This cannot be a “one size fits all” model; the approach must be adaptable and well resourced. Survey respondents explained that demands on their time have increased while resources have dwindled. In the end, professionals who pursued post-secondary studies for a career in education<sup>11</sup> find themselves “*putting out fires.*” In the words of one participant: “*Think how you would feel being abused at work when you thought you were going to help children learn.*” This has, as we have seen in this report, a significant impact on workers. It also means that children who need support but are not disruptive are passed over, while those who are disruptive are not having their needs met either – neither group is getting the assistance that would allow them to thrive. The following quotation by an educational assistant speaks to the tragedy playing out in schools across Ontario:

*“I am physically and mentally exhausted. Our workload has become greater and even though there isn’t enough support provided by the government, the special needs students are still going to school. A student that is violent doesn’t get support, but we are constantly pulled from students who are supposed to get support, to help the students that don’t qualify for support. When I started with the school board 19 years ago, a student with Asperger’s would get support – not any longer. But they still need help!”*

The extraordinarily high rates and frequency of violence experienced by classroom-based workers warrants immediate but careful consideration. The results of this study indicate that most classroom-based workers and support staff will experience violence and harassment, mostly from the students they are expected to support and educate, during any given year and that for many, the experience of harassment and violence will be repeated throughout the school year. The experience of violence is, in our view, increasingly a defining feature of this type of work.

Addressing this significant problem will require a commitment to immediate action, including:

- **Adequate resources for students:** There is a desperate need for adequate resourcing to ensure students are afforded the support they require to meet their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural needs. Accordingly, it is vital that resources to ensure the most vulnerable students are getting appropriate and adequate help. This will require, among other things, augmented health services (e.g., early diagnosis and interventions), additional educational supports (e.g., EAs), and smaller classes to facilitate the individualized attention mandated by the *Education Act*. Moreover, despite the significant aid that EAs and ECEs provide, the benefit of these resources and the effectiveness of these workers may be curtailed or diminished without additional support to students outside of school hours.
- **Support for classroom-based and school support staff:** Resources are needed to support education sector workers to address their mental and physical health needs in the context of the escalating harassment and violence they are experiencing. Participants in the current study who indicated that they were receiving psychological services mentioned an inadequate level of benefits, often as few as six sessions of treatment, an amount too few to adequately treat mental illness, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and far less than what other professions with similar rates of post-traumatic stress disorder can access.
- **Additional training:** Training is required to ensure that administrators have the skills to adequately address harassment and violence in schools and provide meaningful support to educators who experience harassment and violence. Moreover, the high likelihood that most classroom-based workers will be exposed to frequent harassment and violence – as many as 30% report not receiving formal training in a variety of techniques and strategies to manage harassment and violence – is an important opportunity to ensure that all classroom-based workers are appropriately equipped to deal with the frequent occurrence of harassment and violence.

*I try to focus on keeping staff and students safe. I try not to think of the violence. However, my heart pumps hard, and my body feels numb several times a day. I am certain I cannot work in this environment for too long. (EA)*

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the Ontario Colleges described the job of educational assistant as “assisting teachers and other classroom staff in carrying out education plans. This may include working with students on their academic studies, assisting children with disabilities or special needs and more.”

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