

**ARTICLE**

Addressing Violence in the Workplace

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When workplace violence happens in schools there is a risk of physical and mental harm to both adults and children. The classroom is disrupted and the whole school community can be affected. Both educators and students can become fearful at the prospect of violence happening again.

When we say “workplace violence” we are connecting to the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA). The OHSA defines workplace violence, and sets out required workplace violence programs and duties.

The OHSA definition of workplace violence is broad. It includes actions that result in physical injury as well as attempts to cause that injury and threatening statements or behaviours. The source of the violence is a “person” in the workplace, adult or child. The victim is a worker. As ETFO members, our workplace is typically the school setting. Here is the OHSA definition:

Workplace violence means,

- (a) the exercise of physical force by a person against a worker, in a workplace, that causes or could cause physical injury to the worker,
- (b) an attempt to exercise physical force against a worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker,
- (c) a statement or behaviour that it is reasonable for a worker to interpret as a threat to exercise physical force against the worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker.

Each of the basic steps below refer to legal rights that are already in place to protect you from violence in your workplace. You are invited to read this review with “fresh eyes.” Could any of the steps below help you better deal with issues at work?

1. Getting help when workplace violence occurs or is likely to occur.

You should be able to call for immediate assistance wherever you are at work including a classroom, supervision duty, portable, school yard, library, computer lab, field trip etc. The “PA” system and walkie-talkies need to be in working order. When you call for immediate assistance, someone at the office must be available to take your call.

2. Reporting incidents of workplace violence to the principal.

You are required to report workplace violence incidents. You need to be able to complete these reports quickly and effectively, and then submit them to the principal. The workplace violence report is a very important part of protection and prevention. A behaviour log is not a substitute for a workplace violence report.

3. The principal must respond to your workplace violence report.

The principal is required to investigate and deal with a workplace violence report. Actions can include: the assessment or reassessment of the risks of violence; the development or revision of a safety plan; or a case conference. There are workplace violence incidents for which a principal may need to contact the police.

4. Reporting injury or illness resulting from workplace violence.

When workplace violence causes injury or illness, an accident/illness report is required. If you need first aid, then report it on the same form. On the day of the incident, if you need access to a doctor, your principal is required to arrange for your transportation during the working day. If you need to make a WSIB claim, get in touch with your ETFO local for support and ask your medical practitioner to complete a WSIB Form 8.

5. Information about a person with a history of violent behaviours.

The principal has a duty to provide you with information about the risks of harm from a person with a history of violence. This duty happens if two factors are in place: you may encounter that person in the course of your work and the risk of workplace violence from that person is likely to cause you physical injury. Of course, there are limits on the disclosure of this information to what is “reasonably necessary” to protect you from physical injury.

6. Work refusal.

A worker has the legal right to refuse to work, or do particular work, where they have reason to believe that the work is likely to endanger them. Work refusal is an option that is very serious, but sometimes necessary. If you are a teacher, you have a limited right to refuse work due to your responsibilities to the students. If you believe you are being endangered by workplace violence, then report your concerns to the principal right away and get immediate assistance. Contact your ETFO local for advice and support.

If you need support or advice about workplace violence get in touch with your ETFO local or ETFO provincial office. The ETFO health and safety website has more information about workplace violence. See etfohealthandsafety.ca for more information.