

'Alarming' rise in attacks on Hamilton public school staff: report

'It is a crisis,' high school union head says as incidents more than double

4,330 violent incident reports filed by school staff during the 2022-23 school year. Some employees are exercising their right to refuse unsafe work.



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Pictures posted on the Canadian Office and Professional Employees union Local 527 website show some of the school injuries suffered by members.

COPE 527 photos

Union leaders say an “alarming” surge in violent attacks by students on their members at Hamilton public schools will only get worse unless the province antes up more money for educational assistants and behavioural professionals.

The public board’s latest annual report shows the 4,330 violent incident reports filed by school staff during the 2022-23 school year were more than double the [year before](#), with educational assistants and child and youth care practitioners seeing the biggest increases.

While more than 80 per cent of overall incidents were categorized as “no injury,” those requiring first aid saw the steepest rise at 499, compared to 139 the year before. Incidents needing health care and time off from work were up for all employee groups other than high school teachers, whose health care incidents dropped by one.

Yet time-off-work incidents for high school teachers jumped to 10 in 2022-23 from none in 2021-22, two the year before that and four in 2018-19, the year before the pandemic.

“I don’t like to be hyperbolic with my language but it is a crisis,” said Daryl Jerome, president of the board’s secondary teachers local. “It’s alarming.”

He said attacks on high school educational assistants are a particular concern, with nearly one in five incident reports from those working in self-contained high school classrooms for students with special needs.

“They’re the lowest paid and they’re getting literally beaten up, the stuffing kicked out of them, on any given day.”

Jerome said the situation is so bad members are exercising their right to refuse unsafe work, including for about nine hours at Nora Frances Henderson Secondary School last November.

He said the board is trying to address the problem with a review by specialized services superintendent Sharon Stephanian and more staff training, but those measures can only go so far without more provincial funding for EAs and specialists.

“You have students that are in need, a 100 per cent, and we will teach those students that are in need but you have to resource it properly, you have to have them in the right environment,” Jerome said.

“Unless there’s some massive injection of funds and overhaul of how we teach and accommodate these young people, it’s going to get worse. We’re seeing people leave the profession.”

Jeff Sorensen, president of the board’s elementary teachers local, echoes those sentiments, suggesting many school boards see more training as a cost-saving measure to avoid hiring more staff.

He said his union supports integrating special-needs students into regular classrooms, but violence often occurs because schools are short-staffed due to illnesses or EAs are busy with non-teaching tasks, like helping students go to the washroom.

“There are too few adults trying to help too many kids, and some of those kids have real, serious needs that cause them in their frustration to act out, often violently,” Sorensen said. “(Integration) has to be with the proper supports and that’s what’s lacking.”

Susan Lucek, who as president of Canadian Office and Professional Employees union (COPE) Local 527 represents EAs and child and youth care practitioners, said she believes her members under-report [their violent incidents](#) because they are seen as part of the job.

“If they’re not sent for health care or (have) lost time, they’re not going to do it because nothing gets done,” she said. “There’s supposed to be a debriefing after every incident, but there’s not enough time, not enough people.”

Lucek said she’s also had members refuse to work because they feel it’s unsafe and the ongoing violence leads to more sick days, which have also been [on the rise](#) at the board.

“I just had a member that went to the hospital the other day after being kicked in the head by a student. I have one returning that has been off for two years,” she said.

“Those are the extreme cases, but even the things we don’t think anything of, a slap here, a kick there, that all affects your mental health, and I’ve noticed an increase in medical leaves for mental health among COPE members.”

The increase in violent incident reports had trustees questioning what the board can do when the latest statistics were presented at their Jan. 30 human resources committee meeting.

While staff said the trend may look worse because numbers dropped during the pandemic, when most students were learning from home, the 2022-23 incidents requiring first aid, health care or time off were also often multiple times higher than 2018-19.

“It looks like this could be one of the most serious problems we’re facing as a board,” trustee Todd White said. “I don’t want to sensationalize it, but that’s what it looks like.”

Associate director Matthew Gerard said the report will be used to ensure there is better monitoring, proper resources and measures to resolve violent incidents, which will likely be reflected in staff’s proposed board budget for the 2024-25 school year.

“Ultimately what this needs to become is, in your mind, the baseline data that helps you to understand what staff recommends in terms of resourcing within the system, so when you see the budget, this is some good information to consider.”