

# Managing Violence in Schools

## 1. Preamble

- 1.1 All students and education workers have a right to work in a safe and violence-free workplace.
- 1.2 In addition to its criminal law implications, violence in schools is a health and safety issue and it is the responsibility of the employer to provide a safe working environment.
- 1.3 It is also a moral responsibility of schools/systems to provide learning environments which enable all students to reach their full potential.
- 1.4 The IEU Victoria Tasmania has become aware of growing concern amongst its membership about the increasing incidence and changing nature of violence in schools, and the inadequacy of many existing policies, resourcing and support arrangements at school and system level to deal effectively with such violence.
- 1.5 The concern arises at all levels of schooling, particularly in the primary and middle years of schooling. There is a clear perception amongst teachers that the problems being brought into schools are increasing in both quantity and degree.
- 1.6 The rise in violence in schools is a result of a complex interplay of economic and social factors. To effectively deal with this violence requires diverse and well-resourced strategies to be developed and implemented both in schools and across social agencies.

## 2. The Nature of Violence in Schools

### 2.1 Definition

Violence in schools is present in any situation where a member of the school community (teacher, student, other education worker, parent or visitor) is intimidated, bullied, abused, threatened or assaulted; or their property is deliberately damaged by another member of that

community or the public in circumstances arising out of their activities in a school.

### 2.2 Therefore, violence in schools may be:

- student(s) to student(s);
- student(s) to staff member;
- staff member to student;
- staff member to staff member;
- caused by or involve a parent;
- caused by “outside” forces not directly connected to the school.

### 2.3 Forms of Violence

- harassment which is sex-based and specifically aimed at primary and secondary school age girls and female teachers;
- racial harassment;
- student to student verbal and physical abuse, particularly in the school yard, but also occurring in the classroom;
- student verbal and physical assault upon teachers;
- verbal abuse of teachers by parents;
- vandalism and theft of property.

## 3. The Impact of Violence in Schools

### 3.1 Student learning

Actual violence/harassment, or fear of violence, has a considerable negative effect on students’ capacity to participate fully in learning, particularly related to reduced motivation, impaired academic functioning and, in some cases, such students exhibit behaviour problems themselves.

There is evidence which indicates a clear correlation between the rise in teacher anxiety and a corresponding rise in students’ anxiety, alienation and expression of behaviour and academic problems.

### 3.2 Teacher stress and diminished effectiveness

In most studies of teacher stress, the fear of

violence by students rates as a significant source of stress. The larger sources of stress appear to be time pressures and lack of support with problems of student behaviour from school administrations.

Researchers have detailed much evidence that sustained stress over a long period of time will lead to psychological symptoms, physical illness and diminished coping resources, and that there is a clear correlation between pupil aggression and poor teacher health, particularly where teachers feel they lack the disciplinary policy back-up to deal effectively with students.

In cases of serious harm caused by violence, there is little evidence of the provision of effective counselling services and ongoing support, and many teacher (and student) victims of violence are left believing they themselves are at fault.

#### **4. Procedures and Strategies**

The desirable outcome of the process of management of student behaviour in educational setting is students who are independent, self-reliant, and self-motivated learners who can intervene in their own education and exercise some control over their own learning situation.

The key to dealing with the majority of problems around violence in schools begins with the development and implementation of an effective school behaviour management policy by each school.

##### **4.1 Behaviour Management Policies**

Behaviour management policies in schools must :

1. be based on the premise that management of student behaviour should be preventative in nature, viewed in a holistic way and related to a range of aspects of education, such as curriculum, classroom organisation, class sizes and so on;
2. ensure consistency in the encouragement of students to see a series of consistent and inevitable consequences resulting from certain actions, and to take responsibility for their own actions;
3. involve teachers, parents and students in its development and implementation;
4. be based on the understanding that student behaviour management is not simply one person's responsibility, and that policies should develop commonly agreed and implemented action stages, which outline the roles and responsibilities of various parties such as, students, parents, classroom teachers, other and specialist staff, year/other co-ordinators, school executive, system;
5. underpin each stage with the provision of

adequate support from both within the school (and system) and outside the school, ranging from, for example, staff "team" approaches to working on behaviour management programs for groups of students, through to access to specialist professionals and targeted professional development programs, etc;

6. be complemented by adequately resourced system policies. Schools and systems need to ensure that there are ongoing resources allocated to support behaviour management policies. These include such areas as:
  - class sizes in the years p-2 which do not exceed 26, and in years 3-10 which do not exceed 29;
  - access to student counsellors in all schools;
  - access to quality professional development for all teachers;
  - whole school approaches and structures to problem solving.

##### **4.2 Severely disruptive students**

Teachers and students have a legal right to have the issue of severely disruptive/violent/abusive and aggressive student(s) treated by the school executive (and systems) as a matter of urgency.

In such instances, classroom teachers should be entitled to work through an appropriate and agreed range of strategies/procedures with both the school executive and other support personnel.

Schools (and systems) must have clear policies, resources and facilities which deal adequately with severely disruptive students, including policies for professional counselling and special programs, suspension and exclusion of students, and "negotiated contracts" with students and parents.

In both instances where schools agree to enrol students who have a known history of violence, or when students already enrolled exhibit continual violent/ behaviour, school and system policy must provide a procedure which involves:

- initial and ongoing consultation with classroom teacher(s) involved;
- a "negotiated" contract with the student (and parent) which outlines behaviour and clear procedures for when such expectations are not met (including, where appropriate, suspension and exclusion);
- additional support to be allocated to both teacher and student.

##### **4.3 Violence against school staff**

When a student inflicts violence upon a staff member:

1. that student shall be immediately removed from the classroom and/or any contact with other staff;
2. the student shall not be allowed to return to the classroom and/or have any contact with staff until a plan and any necessary additional resourcing is in place which will guarantee safety for members of staff;
3. should the school fail to provide such a plan and necessary additional resourcing, all members of the Independent Education Union Victoria Tasmania in a school will attend work but will refuse to undertake duties pertaining to that student, until such a plan and any necessary resourcing is in place.
4. Staff should be informed of any rights they may have under criminal and civil law when a student inflicts violence upon members of the Independent Education Union Victoria Tasmania.

#### **4.4 *Victims of violent behaviour***

Teachers and students need to be made aware of, and be able to exercise, their legal rights and responsibilities in the area of assault. Teachers and students who are victims of violence and harassment need to have a clear, adequately resourced program of treatment, counselling and ongoing support.

#### **4.5 *Vandalism and theft***

In addition to the above outlined management procedures, schools and systems must compensate staff for any damage to or theft of their property which occurs in the carrying out of their duties.

#### **4.6 *Reporting***

Staff who are subjected to violence from students should be made aware of their entitlements to Workers Compensation (WorkCover) and a report of the incident should be made in the school's accident book.