

Edinburgh Local Association

Press Release

The Stark Reality of Violence in Edinburgh's Schools

Teachers at breaking point as learning disrupted on a daily basis

The Edinburgh Local Association of the EIS has today (Saturday 25th November 2023) released data on its members' views on violence, aggression and disruptive behaviour within the City's schools. The information has been taken from the EIS national branch survey on violence and aggression.

With over half the Primary and Special Schools in the City responding, and 17 of the Authority's 23 Secondary Schools, the data offers a comprehensive insight into the types of violent behaviour taking place as well as the damaging impact it is having on teachers' wellbeing and pupils' learning.

Commenting, Local Association President, Phill Pearce said, "We have serious concerns about the violent behaviour that members in our branches are experiencing and we're asking the Local Authority and Senior Leaders in schools to work with us urgently to end it.

"71% of schools report a significant increase in Pupil-on-Teacher violent and aggressive incidents over the last four years, to the point where that same number are experiencing them on a daily basis.

"The most common types of assault are intimidatory, obscene or derogatory verbal comments aimed at teachers, but close behind these are instances of actual physical violence, with 68% of schools reporting hitting, slapping, punching, kicking, hair-pulling, biting, pushing, tripping or the throwing of objects at teachers.

"There is a very worrying gender-based aspect to this behaviour – 67% of Edinburgh schools say that violence and aggression towards teachers is most commonly shown by boys, and 47% say that boys are more likely to exhibit it towards female teachers than male. The Local Authority needs to find ways to address this gender-based violence in our schools, where the majority of staff are women, and to support boys in becoming less aggressive."

Mr Pearce added, "The impact of all this behaviour is devastating. Every single school has said that teachers are more stressed and 97% that teachers have increased levels of anxiety or depression. 70% indicate that they have had teachers on sick leave following a violent and aggressive incident, and a massive 80% report that some members in their branch have considered leaving teaching as a result of violence and aggression that they have been subjected to or have had to deal with."

Edinburgh Local Association Secretary, Alison Murphy, commented: "Pupils' learning is also obviously affected by violence and aggression. Members in all our branches are reporting that other pupils' behaviour is adversely affected to the point where it's difficult to maintain or regain attention or focus, with knock-on impacts on quality teaching and learning."

Ms Murphy continued, "Edinburgh Council have worked well with us to produce a very good policy on Behaviours of Concern, but the key next step is to close the gap between policy and practice. We need to see a Health, Safety and Wellbeing Committee in every single school, fully representative of class teachers and support staff as well as senior leaders, meeting every month; we need proper reporting and recording of incidents, with staff receiving timely feedback on actions and associated changes to risk assessments; we need to ensure staff have supported time out to recover from incidents, and adequate time for the proper following of restorative approaches; we need enough specialist staff (educational psychologists, Support for Learning teachers etc) to be able to properly support pupils with additional needs; we urgently need to address the recruitment, retention and pay of our incredibly valuable Pupil Support Assistants; we need properly funded support services – everything from CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services) to after school and holiday care – so that children and families have the support they need to thrive at school."

Edinburgh Local Association Vice-President Claire Robertson added, "Very worryingly, well over half of all schools reported unacceptable behaviours from parents/carers. This includes intimidating comments, verbal threats, obscene language and even physical assault. No teacher or school leader should have to put up with this – we need City of Edinburgh to make it completely clear that it

will not tolerate its staff being subject to such behaviours, and to put in place robust measures to properly protect staff when it does occur. We also need the majority of parents and carers, who clearly agree with us that this is completely unacceptable, to challenge such behaviour when they witness it, and to join schools in changing the culture to one that ensures schools are places of safety for everyone – pupils, staff and families.”

Tom Britton, Edinburgh Local Association Assistant Secretary, said, “The situation in special schools continues to be very challenging. Our members report daily incidents of pupils with very complex needs struggling to cope in classes that we think are too big to meet the needs of these pupils. There have been huge changes over the last ten years within special schools. Most of the pupils now in special schools are autistic and are non-verbal. Pupils can become very dysregulated, and this often leads to challenging behaviour. Staffing continues to be a major difficulty, particularly with support staff, and this reflects the reality of how challenging working in special schools currently is.”

Allan Crosbie, EIS national Vice President and member of Edinburgh Local Association Executive Committee, said, “The data from Edinburgh very much aligns with what we’re seeing nationally from our survey of branches across the country. When they see our full report from the survey, employers and Scottish Government may try to convey a narrative that these huge increases in incidents of violence and aggression are because of the Covid pandemic.

“This is not true. While Covid may have exacerbated the issues, the root cause goes back about 15 years. What we’re seeing now in classrooms is a reaping of the whirlwind of education cuts in the six years to 2015, when the Scottish Government oversaw a 7% cut in education spending and Councils slashed ASN support services.

“Pupil Equity Fund monies from 2015 did not replace those support structures adequately and pupil support needs and violent behaviour have increased dramatically as a result, alongside worsening levels of poverty and inequality.

“One of the key messages in our Stand Up for Quality Education campaign is that the Scottish Government must invest properly in education so that teachers can meet the increasingly complex needs of our young people.

“One crucial step they need to take is to realise their manifesto promise of employing an additional 3,500 teachers and cutting class contact hours to 21 per week. The issue of violence and aggression is not just one for Local Authorities to tackle – Scottish Government need to step up also.”

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