

AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
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Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Educators in Schools

The American Psychological Association (APA) and National Education Association (NEA) share deep and growing concerns about violence against educators. Occurrences of physical and verbal aggression and violence against educators can have a lasting impact on the safety of school communities and the well-being of educators and students. Both organizations continue to elevate the issue and, in response to the growing needs of students and educators, have developed resources and publications to address concerns about verbal and physical violence, educator retention, school climate, and educator and student safety and well-being.

This document synthesizes findings from two national surveys conducted by the [APA's Task Force on Violence Against Educators and School Personnel](#) and educator safety information from the NEA. It also includes joint NEA–APA recommendations and resources to address violence.

The APA Task Force collaborated with NEA and other national organizations¹ to survey teachers, administrators, school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and other staff regarding their experiences with school violence before, during, and after COVID-19. Nearly 15,000 participants took part in the 2020–2021 academic year survey and nearly 12,000 participated in the 2022 survey, with participants hailing from all 50 states and Puerto Rico. The NEA resources—drawn from educator interviews, NEA member surveys, and [NEA's School Gun Violence Prevention and Response Guide](#)² released in 2024—highlight educator perspectives on school safety, school culture, educator safety, advocacy, and educator well-being. They include research and strategies to support the creation of safe, supportive, welcoming schools.

Three themes emerged from a review of APA's and NEA's research and resources:

1. How to keep educators safe;
2. Methods to provide positive behavior supports and create safe school cultures; and
3. Understanding the relationship between school violence and educator well-being and retention.

¹ APA's Task Force on Violence Against Educators and School Personnel also collaborated with the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of Social Workers, and the School Social Work Association of America.

² NEA partnered with the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund to produce the guide.

WHY THIS TOPIC IS CRITICAL

Educators are instrumental to the academic, social, and emotional development of students. Their safety and well-being have important implications for the overall school community. Educators have expressed concerns in the following areas.

Frequency of Violence Against Educators

Violence against educators and school personnel was prevalent in the APA Task Force survey data. For example, most surveyed teachers (80 percent), school psychologists and social workers (63 percent), administrators (64 percent), and school staff (65 percent) reported they experienced at least one incident of verbal or threatening violence from students during the 2021–2022 academic year. Rates of physical violence were lower but still substantial: teachers (56 percent); school psychologists, social workers, and counselors (56 percent); administrators (43 percent); and staff (53 percent) reported at least one incident of physical violence from students (McMahon, Worrell, et al., 2024).

Although the pandemic helped to fuel many acts of disruptive and violent behavior toward educators, violence and aggression toward educators had already been significant before COVID-19 (Walker, 2021). National data from the APA Task Force on Classroom Violence Against Teachers (Espelage et al., 2013) survey from 2010 indicated that 80 percent of teachers surveyed reported experiencing some form of violence or aggression, with the majority experiencing violence from students (94 percent) followed by parents (37 percent) and colleagues (21 percent) (McMahon et al., 2014).

More than 50 percent of those working in K-12 schools and institutions of higher education reported being concerned with student behavior and mental health.

50%

In an NEA 2024 survey of 3,655 educators, more than 50 percent of those working in K-12 schools and institutions of higher education reported being concerned with student behavior and mental health (SSRS, 2024).

Demanding Work Conditions

Findings from a 2023 Rand study, funded in part by the NEA, suggested that among educators, adverse working conditions—including feelings of insecurity at work and excessive workloads—posed significant psychological and physical safety concerns that have negatively impacted educator retention (Steiner, Woo, & Doan, 2023).

Whereas the majority of educators surveyed listed school safety as a top concern, more than 45 percent cited large classes and caseloads, job-related stress, and burnout as areas of workplace concern (SSRS, 2024).

Troubling Levels of Staff Turnover and Shortage

One-quarter of teachers intended to transfer schools, and 43 percent reported intentions to quit the teaching profession based on experiences with violence and concerns about school climate (McMahon, Swenski, et al., 2024).

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Staff turnover has implications for student learning, educator morale, and general school functioning. According to a 2024 NEA member survey, 49 percent of respondents reported that unfulfilled job openings leading to more work for remaining staff was a big concern (SSRS, 2024).

EDUCATOR SAFETY: THE NATURE OF EDUCATOR VIOLENCE

Addressing school violence and safety should include the entire school ecology. Educator demographics, community factors, and school characteristics—like urbanicity and school climate—play roles in teacher susceptibility to direct acts of violence (McMahon, Worrell, et al., 2024). These safety concerns are not limited to violence committed by students; the APA Task Force’s research demonstrated that colleagues, parents, and administrators are also aggressors against educators. For example, after COVID-19, one-quarter of teachers reported physical violence from a parent, colleague, or administrator (McMahon, Worrell, et al., 2024).

The 2024 NEA survey also indicated that 56 percent of educators surveyed were concerned with a lack of respect from parents and/or the public (SSRS, 2024). Ninety percent of teachers and 85 percent of education support professionals (ESPs)³ working in pre-K–12 education believed that making schools safe for students and staff should be a high or top priority for an education association or union, according to NEA survey data.

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Recommendations for Improving Educator Safety

- ➡ Provide ongoing training and support to educators and school leaders on school safety and prevention strategies, including de-escalation, trauma-informed practices, restorative justice approaches, social-emotional learning, behavior management, and cultural competency.
- ➡ Co-develop policies with educators, students, and families to establish shared understanding and commitment to addressing responses to violence in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways.
- ➡ Provide research-based prevention resources to meet all students’ academic, social, and mental health needs.
- ➡ Limit or eliminate the use of zero-tolerance responses and implement alternative strategies, such as conflict resolution, mediation, and trauma-informed approaches.
- ➡ Prioritize policies that advocate for funding and resources for educator training in violence prevention and response and positive behavior support strategies.
- ➡ Advocate for organizing and collective bargaining efforts that expand options for employee assistance programs and additional benefits to help address physical and psychological injury risks within the school environment.
- ➡ Support the creation and work of locally developed violence-prevention committees that include administrators, educators, families, and, where developmentally appropriate, students, and ensure that existing health and safety committees incorporate violence prevention within their work.

³Education support professionals (ESPs) represent school support staff across nine career families: clerical services; custodial and maintenance; food services; health and student services; paraeducators; security workers; skilled trades; technical services; and transportation services.

POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORTS AND SAFE SCHOOL CULTURE

School culture is foundational to creating safe school environments. By addressing student physical and mental health needs and implementing strategies to support a safe school culture, schools can help deter school violence. NEA members reported that educators had serious concerns about school climate-related issues, such as student behavior and lack of respect from parents (GBAO, 2022). Research by the APA Task Force on Violence against Educators and School Personnel highlighted the relationship between school climate and student behavioral issues (Reddy et al., 2024). “Physical violence against teachers was predicted by two out of the four measures of school climate, specifically student climate problems and student behavioral problems” (Reddy et al., 2024, p. 5).

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To effectively implement transformative support services, schools need to not only guarantee monetary investments but also employ efforts to ensure equity and community buy-in (Walker, 2022). Incident-focused strategies are unlikely to “move the needle” in creating safe and healthy environments. Practices should support safe school culture, social and emotional well-being, restorative discipline, and mental health; be developmentally appropriate; and consider student and community cultural factors (CASEL, 2025).

Recommendations for Promoting Safe School Cultures

- ➡ Support policies and practices promoting and fostering a school environment that champions diversity among students and educators and welcomes and supports all.
- ➡ Provide training and support for educators and school leaders that cover how to work with diverse populations and foster positive relationships with students and between students and their peers.
- ➡ Implement student support services that focus on building resilience, positive relationships, and emotional regulation.
- ➡ Enhance collaboration between school community interest holders—including, but not limited to, students, educators, and families—to develop meaningful relationships through activities such as clubs, sports, civic opportunities, and community-building circles in classrooms.
- ➡ Advocate for organizing and bargaining efforts that support racial and social justice, diversity, and cultural representation training and resources.

EDUCATOR WELL-BEING AND RETENTION

Acts of violence against educators are detrimental to the school environment and educator health and well-being. Many educators are feeling overwhelmed and burned out, lacking school or district support and resources to address the issue of violence. In 2022, at a U.S. Congress briefing organized by the APA Task Force on Violence Against Educators and School Personnel, a special education teacher explained that she decided to leave the profession after being punched in the face by a student. “I didn’t quit because of the overwhelming obstacles or even aggression from students,” she said. “I left because my administrators didn’t have the resources, and elected officials failed to give us the funding my students and my team needed to keep us all safe. They see the blood, they see the struggles, and they walk away.” (Walker, 2022)

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In a 2022 NEA survey, 61 percent of respondents reported feeling burnout from the general stress of the COVID-19 pandemic (GBAO, 2022). Similar to pandemic rates, the APA Task Force found educators and school staff experienced high rates of work-related anxiety and stress after COVID-19 restrictions in 2022, with 68 percent of teachers; 70 percent of school staff; 65 percent of school psychologists, social workers, and counselors; and 39 percent of administrators reporting experiencing stress and anxiety (McMahon, Worrell et al., 2024). More than half of teachers reported wanting to quit their jobs (McMahon, Swenski, et al., 2024). Violence directed against educators led to work-related stress and anxiety and contributed to intentions to transfer or quit (McMahon, Swenski, et al., 2024). Schools and districts should provide support, training, and resources to educators and school personnel to improve mental health and well-being.

Recommendations for Addressing Educator Well-Being and Retention

- ➡ Provide adequate staffing across school roles, especially special education and emergent multilingual learner supports.
- ➡ Provide training that incorporates self-care, coping skills, and mentoring.
- ➡ Facilitate staff team-building activities to strengthen collaboration and support.
- ➡ Fund educator health and wellness initiatives.
- ➡ Provide leadership training to identify stress, staff needs, and feedback mechanisms to address needs.
- ➡ Create policies and training that are informed by ongoing feedback and data from educators to ensure that interest holders have regular input and that their needs are being addressed.



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www.apa.org/education-career/k12/violence-educators

ABOUT THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

The APA Task Force on Violence Against Educators and School Personnel—chaired by Susan D. McMahon (DePaul University), with members Eric M. Anderman (The Ohio State University), Ron Avi Astor (UCLA Luskin), Dorothy L. Espelage (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Andrew Martinez (Center for Justice Innovation, NYC), Linda A. Reddy (Rutgers University), and Frank C. Worrell, PhD (University of California, Berkeley)—was essential in the development of this work. The Task Force is supported by APA’s portfolio on Child and Adolescent Learning and Well-Being. APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States.

For more information, please contact Nicole Barnes, senior director, child and adolescent learning and well-being, at nbarnes@apa.org.



www.nea.org/healthy-schools

ABOUT THE NEA HEALTH AND SAFETY PROGRAM

When unaddressed, health and safety issues undermine the health of students and educators, weaken student learning outcomes, exacerbate educator shortages, and burden school budgets. That’s why the NEA established the Health and Safety Program—to bring focus, support, energy, and an equity lens to resolving new and long-standing health and safety problems in Pre-K-12 education settings, institutions of higher education, and other public employee worksites. The Program focuses on environmental and occupational health, school health, mental health, and violence prevention and response.

You can contact the NEA Health and Safety Program at healthandsafetyprogram@nea.org.

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