

Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation  
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# **How to Create Safe Healthy Schools**

  

## **An OSSTF Brief**

[www.osstf.on.ca](http://www.osstf.on.ca)

## **How to Create Safe Healthy Schools An OSSTF Brief**

### **Introduction**

OSSTF welcomes the government's focus on safe schools. OSSTF has made school safety a priority for several years, developing resources and delivering workshops on Crisis Awareness, bullying, Health and Safety, and School Law to thousands of our members. Many of our members face safety concerns almost daily. One of our next major professional development conference will feature the theme of "Safe Healthy Schools". We welcome the chance to work provincially and especially locally to improve safety for all our students and staff.

With respect to the initiatives announced in December 2004, OSSTF would like to make some specific comments and recommendations.

### **Safety Audits**

If safety truly is everyone's business, the current direction of the government to include members of the school community in safety audits would, at first blush, appear to be proactive. However, the deliberate exclusion of support staff members minimizes the importance of this inclusionary process. Relevant and meaningful health and safety training for all members of the safety audit team would be a prudent and indeed necessary vehicle to ensure that the very people who are performing the audit know what they are looking for.

For many years, OSSTF members on joint health and safety committees have been advocating for increased access to health and safety training with limited success. Within the context of the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, what role would the audit team play in making recommendations to joint health and safety committees? What role would the joint committee members play in these audits? Who will monitor the implementation of recommendations?

OSSTF strongly believes that strengthening the roles of joint committees would be a far more cost effective and relevant process.

The recent \$150,000 fine levied upon the Toronto District School Board for health and safety

violations is indicative of the problems that are rampant in school boards. Issues of violence prevention and identification of hazards have always fallen within the purview of the joint committees, but little or no emphasis or funding has been provided.

OSSTF also believes that the issue of violence is not solely limited to educational workplaces and that a violence regulation should be enacted provincially for all sectors.

## **Access Devices**

OSSTF believes that silent alarm systems can be an appropriate tool to be used as an early warning system. Schools are often open to the public in the evening and there are limited numbers of staff to supervise. Often the custodian is the only employee of the school board in the school at this time and even if another staff member is present, they often have no access to telephones as doors are locked for security purposes.

The use of cameras that record activity at entrances is only effective if monitored by staff who have been trained to recognize potentially violent intruders or abnormal circumstances. If these cameras are not monitored, the recordings would only serve to identify a perpetrator after an incident has occurred. The prophylactic value of cameras is put into question. Cameras should not only monitor entrances but also parking lots, portables, playgrounds and other potentially dangerous areas.

## **Anti-bullying Hotline and Province wide Programs**

Everyone agrees that providing a safe environment in every school and worksite must be a priority. However, OSSTF believes the initiatives announced by the government regarding access devices, an anti-bullying hotline (a service already available through Kids Help Phone) and identification of successful anti-bullying programs are simply too limited to accomplish the government's goal of ensuring safe schools.

First of all, the announcements by the provincial government focus solely on protecting students. While protecting students is obviously vital, OSSTF believes that an effective approach to ensuring a safe school environment must address the safety of all members of the school community. Measures to protect everyone must be put in place, including steps to deal with student-to-staff and parent-to- staff bullying, intruders and gang violence, and family violence issues. Homophobic bullying of both students and staff needs special attention. These steps must reflect the fact that staff not only play a role in preventing violence against others, but can also be victimized by it.

Secondly, the measures announced by the government - security access devices and a provincial

anti-bullying hotline - are narrow rather than comprehensive; reactive, not preventive. As such, they will not be effective in ensuring safe and healthy schools. This will require a re-investment in resources - staff, programs, and training - to enable school communities to address the problems of bullying and violence in a pro-active way.

The past eight years have seen a massive stripping of adults and programs from our schools, deterioration of facilities, and the loss of many critical supports and services for our students. All of these trends must be reversed if we are to rebuild a positive climate in our schools.

Research on bullying tells us that adults in a school must be aware of bullying and involved in counteracting it if a school-based prevention program is to be effective. All staff need more training, which can only happen if time and funding for professional development is restored to school boards. School-based conflict management and anti-bullying initiatives need to be developed by locally mandated Safe Schools Committees that represent all staff and students, as well as administration. Some specific recommendations for targeted initiatives are listed at the end of this paper.

### **Review of the *Safe Schools Act* (Bill 81, 2000)**

Since amendments to the *Education Act* were introduced in Bill 81, 2000, several things have changed. Almost immediately after Bill 81 was enacted, it became apparent that its provisions on suspension and expulsion were completely unworkable, and they had to be mitigated with Regulations issued in 2001. The federal *Youth Criminal Justice Act* was implemented in 2003, with an emphasis on rehabilitation rather than the *Safe Schools Act* emphasis on punishment. The unnecessary criminal record check for all educational employees was carried out efficiently and without incident by the Ontario Education Services Consortium, a creation of cooperating school boards. The Ontario Conservatives were never able to implement their full “boot camp” agenda, and their anti-teacher, anti-worker, discipline at all costs mentality was defeated at the polls.

Some aspects of the Bill were not a problem for school boards to implement. These include section 301, setting out the existence of codes of conduct in every school board, and section 302, establishing that boards must have codes of conduct and suspension and discipline guidelines, and may have policies and guidelines regarding pupil discipline, school safety, access to premises, and appropriate dress.

However, other sections were somewhat heavy-handed. The section 304 requirement to sing the anthem and perhaps recite a pledge of citizenship in every opening exercise is completely unsuited to the culture of a secondary school in Ontario. Regulations allowing cultural sensitivity and flexibility for opening exercises were working well before this Act was implemented and can do so again.

The list of mandatory criteria for suspension (section 306) needs to be significantly rewritten to empower school administrators and boards to decide grounds for an individual suspension on a case by case basis. The list was so inflexible that it had to be reversed in Reg. 106/01, which set out all

of the criteria for when a “mandatory” suspension was not mandatory. Similarly, section 309 regarding mandatory expulsions had to be reversed in Reg. 37/01. Section 306 also gave the power to teachers to assign a one day suspension. Teachers do not want this power and have not exercised it. We recommend that only the principal or vice principal have the power to suspend a student. The time consuming and onerous appeal procedures for suspension and expulsion should be revisited and streamlined as well.

Research into the effects of these initiatives should be completed and publicized. A critical study is needed of trends in suspensions and expulsions under this Act to see if there have been disproportionate numbers of racial minorities targeted. Also, after much initial fanfare, the strict discipline “boot camps” set up under this Act have faded into obscurity. Little is known about their cost, their graduation rate, etc. OSSTF has never believed that strict punishment camps were the right approach to helping troubled youths turn their lives around. A full study should be initiated into the strict discipline programs, including revisiting the value of rehabilitation, restitution or community service alternatives.

Much of what was legislated in Bill 81 of 2000 has been softened and made more workable by regulation, but a significant rewrite of a number of sections is needed. We also recommend that the government use this opportunity to enact a number of initiatives that would be far more successful in the long term than the suspension/expulsion/strict discipline approach.

### **New Educational Initiatives to Promote Student Safety and Success: OSSTF Recommendations**

In addition to **rewriting the safe schools sections of the *Education Act* and regulations**, OSSTF would like to see the government implement and fund the following safe schools initiatives:

1. **A violence regulation** should be added to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* that applies to all sectors.
2. **Empower existing joint health and safety committees** - School safety audit teams including parents and community representatives are a good idea, but support staff must be included. All safety audit team members need to receive meaningful health and safety training from a reputable service provider accredited by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board.

The relationship between the safety audit teams and the joint occupational health and safety committee must be a two-way street. The audit teams should seek informed advice about needed safety enhancements from the joint committee, and then report to the joint committee to ensure that changes are made and monitored. Increased funding for joint health and safety committees is required to make this plan work.

3. **“Whole school safety approach”** - there are many protocols that could be tightened up via

regulation or PPM, directing school boards to ensure that all volunteers and outside agencies have criminal records checks, that all visitors to a school be required to obtain and wear a visitor's badge while on the premises and that reports of violent incidents be shared with the Joint Health and Safety Committee.

One of the important protocols should be that a minimum of two workers be required to be present in the school whenever the building is open.

4. **Funding for Kids Help Phone** - Even with additional supports within the schools, many students will still need outside help to deal with the problems they face. Currently Kids Help Phone plays an important role in providing toll-free, 24 hour, confidential and anonymous telephone and web counseling services for these young people. Kids Help Phone provides assistance to students who need immediate advice, or who are unable or unwilling to speak directly to school or other support people in the community. OSSTF believes that, rather than creating a separate anti-bullying hotline, provincial funding earmarked for this project should be directed to the Kids Help Phone, an established and well-known organization that already has the connections with young people and the capacity to respond to a wide range of youth needs. These funds could be used by Kids Help Phone to develop and promote a provincial anti-bullying initiative in partnership with the government.
5. **More focus on marginalized students** - Students from visible minorities and those with disabilities need more support than they are currently getting. Many school problems reflect difficulties in students' personal lives, and more support staff can really make a difference. Funding for child and youth workers, attendance counselors, monitors, social workers, psychologists, educational assistants and similar support staff in a full service school should be restored. All staff should be inserviced for greater cultural awareness.
6. **Addressing discrimination and promoting equity** - School boards must develop comprehensive equity policies that address all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including homophobia. These policies must not only include equity training and program supports, but also provide clear processes for addressing acts of discrimination and harassment in our schools. As indicated elsewhere in this paper, there are concerns about the differential impact of the Safe Schools Act and the resulting trends in suspensions and expulsions. Local School Boards must examine their safe schools policies and procedures to ensure they do not target students coming from minority or marginalized backgrounds.
7. **Focus on causes and prevention of violence**- in the recent OSSTF research project "From Applied to Applause", 78% of the members surveyed cited behavioural issues as either a large or severe obstacle to student success, and linked the behavioural problems to class size. OSSTF believes that students will be safer and more successful if funding is provided for smaller class sizes, anti-poverty programs to address the root causes of poor student behaviour, more support staff, and mandated and funded professional development training for all staff designed to prevent violence from occurring, in such topics as non-violent crisis intervention, classroom discipline, and gang identification. OSSTF offers an excellent one-

day CALM (Crisis Awareness Learning Modules) workshop.

Students also need more opportunities to develop an awareness of bullying and violence, and to learn anger management and conflict resolution skills. These opportunities for discussion and skill development need to be incorporated across the curriculum. OSSTF has resource books to help teachers in this task, including books on Crisis Management, Conflict Resolution, and “You’ve Got It, Use It” (stay in school initiatives).

8. **Safety devices beyond surveillance cameras** - Silent alarm mechanisms should be provided for schools. All safety devices installed in schools must be monitored by trained staff and within strict guidelines. Safety would also be enhanced by the use of more communication devices such as, walkie-talkies, cell phones and pagers, provided that all staff members are trained in their use.
9. **Administrators present at all times** - It is crucial for student discipline to have consistent and strong administration in the school at all times. When too many external meetings take principals and vice principals out of the school, student discipline becomes problematic. If the absence of all administrators is absolutely necessary, a large pool of recently retired and very experienced administrators is available so that there is no need for the stop-gap appointment of a teacher to “act” in lieu of the proper authority. More training for newly appointed administrators should also be provided.
10. **Alternative programs in lieu of suspensions** - Sending students home for one or more days is not a very effective solution. Instead, they should be sent to funded programs in anger management or conflict resolution. Social workers, psychologists or youth counselors should be available for students to meet with at this time of personal turmoil, so that positive plans can be worked out for real behavioural change. Peer mediation programs should be set up in all large secondary schools. All of these programs require funding, but their long term value far outweighs the short-term cost.
11. **Community Policing** - School safety can be enhanced by the presence of a familiar police presence in the neighbourhood and frequently in the school itself. However, any such initiative can only succeed if it is seen as non-punitive, sensitive to and supported by local communities and free of any possibility or perception of racial profiling. Cooperation among school, community and police can best implement prevention programs and enhance cross-over between rehabilitative programs under the Youth Criminal Justice Act and school disciplinary measures through non-threatening, proactive initiatives, particularly in large urban schools. The Rebound program in the Sarnia Lambton District School Board is one example of such a local initiative that could serve as a model for the province.

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*OSSTF/FEÉSO, founded in 1919, has 50,000 members across Ontario. They include public high school teachers, occasional teachers, educational assistants, continuing education instructors, psychologists, secretaries, speech-language pathologists, social workers, plant support personnel, attendance counsellors, and many others in education.*