

# Facts about Violence in Our Schools

## GUIDELINES FOR LOCAL LEADERS

### A preventable occupational hazard

School violence is a serious occupational hazard and a major concern for NJEA members. National events over the past few years have demonstrated that no school is immune from violent incidents. Violence can cause not only physical injury but serious psychological injury as well. While it is true that schools are among the safest places for students, it is also true that assault, threats, fights, and other violent acts are an all-too-common occurrence in New Jersey schools. Many incidents are predictable; most are preventable. And like any workplace hazard, it is the responsibility of district administration to take reasonable steps to minimize the likelihood of school violence. Management efforts to prevent violence in schools must involve NJEA local leaders and members at every step of the process. The local association's health and safety committee is the best vehicle for dealing with the problem of violence in schools.

#### Two types of school violence

Two kinds of violence should be distinguished. One is violence by trespassers who enter school buildings to steal, rob, or assault someone. These types of incidents are rare in New Jersey. The other type of violence is committed against teachers, administrators, other staff members, or fellow classmates by students enrolled in the school or their families. These types of incidents are more common in New Jersey and include simple assault, aggravated assault, fights, gang fights, robbery, extortion, sex offenses, and threats.

#### High teacher injury rates

Violence is a potential hazard in virtually every school occupation. Special education teachers, junior high school teachers and high school teachers are among the top 12 U.S. occupations in rates of workplace victimization according to data from the U.S. Department of Justice. Rates were 68, 54, and 38 crimes per year per 1,000 workers in those three jobs compared to 261 for law enforcement, the occupation with the highest rate of violent acts, and 12.6 crimes per year per 1,000 workers for all workers on average.

#### New Jersey violence and vandalism report data

Public School Safety Law N.J.S.A.18A: 17-46 requires any school employee observing or having direct knowledge from a participant or victim of violence to file a report describ-

ing the incident to the school principal. Discrimination against an employee who files such a report is prohibited by N.J.S.A.18A: 17-47, and provides restoration of full employment and compensation for any loss of wages.

In an attempt to improve reporting, the N.J. Department of Education (DOE) initiated the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System (EVVRS) in March 2000. NJEA believes this system to be flawed but still useful as discussed in more detail later. EVVRS is an internet-based collection of data on incidents of violence, vandalism, weapons, and substance abuse that occur in or on school property in New Jersey.

Under the system, DOE provides districts with a three-page form that includes a page for each incident, offender, and victim information. Incidents, as defined by the DOE, are reported on the form at the school, and the record of the incident is entered directly on-line. Use of a common form and clear definitions supports uniformity in reporting, although compliance can be problematic.

The DOE has published nine years of data. The baseline data for the 1999-2000 school year showed 21,367 total incidents while the 2003-2004 data showed 20,207 incidents.

Consistent with previous years' data, more than two-thirds of all schools (69 percent) reported five or fewer total incidents in 2003-2004 with one school in three (34 percent)

### HEALTH & SAFETY RESOURCES

Your NJEA UniServ Office

Region 1 – Galloway Twp. Atlantic/  
609 652 9200 Cape May

Region 2 – Mullica Hill Cumberland/  
856 628 8650 Gloucester/Salem

Region 3 – Voorhees Burlington  
856 234 2485 Camden

Region 7 – Toms River Ocean  
732 349 0280

Region 8 – Trenton Mercer  
609 896 3422

Region 9 – Wall Twp. Monmouth  
732 403 8000

Region 11/12 – Edison Middlesex  
732 287 4700

Region 13 – Flemington Hunterdon/  
908 782 2168 Somerset/Warren

Region 15 – Cranford Union  
908 709 9440

Region 17 – Parsippany Morris/Sussex  
973 515 0101

Region 19 – West NY Hudson – North  
201 861 1266

Region 20 – Jersey City Hudson – South  
201 653 6634

Region 21 – Livingston Essex  
973 762 6866

Region 23/25 – Hasbrouck Heights Bergen  
201 292 8093

Region 27 – Wayne Passaic  
973 694 0154

Region 29 – Trenton Higher Education  
609 689 9580

reporting no incidents at all. The distribution of the location of incidents also mirrored that of prior years with three incidents in ten (30 percent) taking place in the classroom and another 21 percent in the school corridor. The police were notified in 38 percent of incidents reported, up six percent in the two years from 2001-02.

This data suggests that many incidents are simply not being reported. More details, including data by district, are available on the DOE website, listed later under

Local leaders need to proceed cautiously on this issue. Beginning with the 2003-04 school year the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) requires:

- Students attending public schools that are identified as “persistently dangerous” have a right to transfer to a “safe” school within the same district.

- Parents to be notified if their child’s school has been identified as “dangerous” and must be informed of transfer rights.
- That any student who is a victim of a violent criminal offense on any public school’s property have the same transfer rights and the parents of these children must be notified of these transfer rights.
- The New Jersey Dept. of Education Unsafe School Choice Option Policy and definition of “persistently dangerous” can be found at [www.nj.gov/education/vandv/options/docs/policy.pdf](http://www.nj.gov/education/vandv/options/docs/policy.pdf)

### District responses to incidents

Out-of-school suspension is the action taken in response to incidents in 85 percent of cases. Short-term suspensions are the norm; suspensions of one – four days are given in 54 percent of the cases. Removal to an alternative program occurred in three percent of the cases.

## PEOSH Compliance Review

### Engage in a process to review or create a written school violence prevention plan

NJEA leaders and members, student services personnel, school district administration and officials, emergency personnel in the municipality, and community leaders should collaborate to develop a written school violence prevention program and school crises response plan. More information on each item can be found in the DOE publication *A Guide for Development of a District Wide School Safety Plan*. A plan should include and/or relate to:

- Written school district policies and procedures
  - Codes of student conduct
  - Crises response plans for violent events, emergencies, or suicide
  - Violent incident reporting to school boards and the DOE
  - Violent incident follow-up for victims and perpetrators
- Physical security
  - Walkthrough survey of the school buildings, grounds, and buses
  - Analysis of violence incident data and records
  - Existing and needed school security measures

- School district curriculum
  - Core curriculum content standards
  - Life skills
  - Character education
- Prevention programs and services
  - Staff development
  - Student programs
  - Community outreach and education
- Intervention programs and services
  - Early/imminent warning signs
  - Intervention and referral services
  - School-community linkages

### Ensure complete incident reporting

NJEA believes under-reporting of violence and vandalism by school districts to be widespread, inconsistent among various districts, and lacking important information. For example, the EVVRS system does not track the job title of school employees affected by violence and vandalism or the circumstances involved. The system also does not track staff-on-staff incidents, sexual harassment, or other harassment not involving a threat. Finally, state officials concede they have no way to verify the numbers reported by districts. Despite its shortcomings, the EVVRS data is useful in helping to describe violence in particular schools and in New Jersey as a whole, and should be supported by local associations. Having a clear picture of violence in each school will help members and leaders select the controls needed. It would be helpful to include these other definitions of incidents on in-house reporting forms for a clearer picture.

Once data is collected it should be examined for patterns in incident type,

## For More Information

New Jersey Healthy School Facility Environments  
<https://www.nj.gov/health/ceohs/environmental-occupational/>

EPA Healthy Schools, Healthy Kids  
[www.epa.gov/schools](http://www.epa.gov/schools)

New Jersey Education Association (NJEA)  
<https://www.njeda.org/health-safety-publications/>

National Education Association (NEA)  
<https://www.nea.org/healthy-schools>

PEOSH health issues – NJ Dept. of Health and Senior Services  
<https://www.nj.gov/health/workplace/healthandsafety/peosh>

PEOSH safety issues – NJ Dept. of Labor and Workforce Development  
<https://www.nj.gov/labor/safetyandhealth/>

New Jersey Work Environment Council (WEC)  
[www.njwec.org](http://www.njwec.org)

location, time of day, or of particular students or staff involvement. Any patterns merit further investigation and may reveal the need for changes in school building security measures or procedures, student counseling, or additional staff training. Ask the district to keep additional data such as job title of staff victims if you think it is necessary to fully understand the nature of violence in your worksite. The local can conduct interviews of victims to find out more about the circumstances of the incident and their opinions on preventing future occurrences.

### Support victims and bystanders

Incident follow-up should include prompt medical evaluation, treatment, and assistance with filling out reporting forms. Follow-up should include information regarding Worker’s Compensation claims for victims and immediate voluntary, confidential counseling, critical incident debriefing, and post-traumatic counseling for victims, bystanders, and others connected to the trauma such as family members. Traumatized employees may also require job accommodations. In some cases, a group debriefing by qualified professionals may be appropriate. This debriefing can provide advice on how to communicate with a co-worker who has been the victim of a violent incident. In addition, NJEA has a confidential HELPLINE available to members and their families 24 hours a day. Calling 1-866-243-6532 (1-866-AID-NJEA) will provide callers with help with personal or professional issues.

### School Health and Safety Committees and Violence

- An excellent way to approach developing a **District Wide School Safety Plan** is through health and safety committees.
- See the **NJEA Health and Safety Facts on Health and Safety Committees** for more information.

## Support suitable interventions for offenders

Tactics to deal with violence often rely on removal of the offender by suspension or placement outside of the mainstream classroom. This can protect staff and other students; however, it has proven ineffective in preventing young people from developing criminal careers. Poverty, racism, unemployment, substance abuse, easy access to weapons, inadequate or abusive parenting, and frequent exposure to violence through the media all contribute to school violence. The local can take the lead in emphasizing learning and improving, not punishment, as the goal of discipline; letting students know they are wanted in the school but there are certain things expected of them; respecting and holding high expectations for students, coaching students; and creating positive connections between staff and students. In all districts, students experiencing emotional, psychological, or physical problems that interfere with learning should have access to educational, therapeutic, counseling, and diagnostic services to correct those problems. Studies have shown that schools with low levels of violent behavior have a positive school climate that is nurturing, inclusive, and evidences a feeling of community. Students who feel recognized and appreciated by at least one adult at school will be less likely to act out violently.

School officials have always had the authority to discipline, and even expel, students whose conduct constitutes a continuing danger to the physical well being of others. N.J.S.A. 18A: 37-2.1 and 2.2 set forth required procedures and consequences for any student who commits an assault with or without a weapon upon a teacher, board member, other employee of a school board on any school property, on a school bus, or at a school function. School administrators can, and should, react swiftly to violence. However, this does not mean they should overreact. Every incident must be investigated and every student given the due process required by law.

## Assure appropriate violence prevention training and resources

Staff is often unprepared to address the needs of disruptive youth. Teachers, education support professionals, and building-level administrators must receive intensive training and sustained staff development for dealing with violence. Their training should include:

- How to create and maintain a well-managed and well-organized classroom or work area;
- How to deal with student disruptions, self-protection;
- How to work effectively with parents so that their children meet academic and behavioral expectations, classroom behavior and academic standards;
- How to work effectively with an ethnically and economically diverse student body;
- How to find community health and social services and link families to them; and
- Incident reporting procedures.

Violence prevention is not a one-time lesson. Staff training is often one part of a comprehensive schoolwide violence education program. The local should help to select training by checking reviews and ratings. Some criteria for evaluating potential training programs include:

- Instituting developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, and long-term training early on;
- Developing student social competence;
- Improving school climate through good organization, and increased student, staff, and parent attachment and participation;
  - Taking into account the impact of violence and victimization by violence;
  - Integrating violence-related issues into staff training; and
  - Having a comprehensive evaluation program.

## Internet resources

**School Safety and Security Plans Minimum Requirement**  
<https://www.nj.gov/education/security/req/req.pdf>  
NJ Department of Education, August 2011. This document outlines the required elements that must be included in every district's plan.

**Commissioner's Report on Student Safety and Discipline in New Jersey Public Schools**  
<https://www.nj.gov/education/vandv/annualreport/index.shtml>

**Guidelines for Preventing Violence for Health Care and Social Service Workers,**  
US Department of Labor, OSHA, 2004  
[www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3148.pdf](http://www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3148.pdf)  
These workplace violence guidelines include policy recommendations and practical corrective methods to help prevent and mitigate the effects of workplace violence.

**OSHA Workplace Violence webpage**  
<https://osha.gov/workplace-violence>

**NIOSH webpage on Occupational Violence**  
<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/violence/default.html>

**CDC webpage on Youth Violence**  
<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/index.html>

**CDC School Violence Fact Sheet**  
[http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/school\\_violence\\_fact\\_sheet\\_a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/school_violence_fact_sheet_a.pdf)

**NIOSH Science Blog on School Violence**  
<https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/category/violence-2/>  
The National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health is conducting a study on workplace violence in PA schools. They have created a blog where teachers, school staff, administrators, and union representatives can share their experiences, ideas, and perspectives on school violence.

The New Jersey Work Environment Council (WEC) prepared this factsheet under the direction of NJEA. Based in Trenton, WEC provides NJEA and other organizations with technical assistance and training about workplace and environmental hazards.

## What your association can do:

- Form a health and safety committee to monitor conditions in the workplace.
- Negotiate health and safety language.
- File grievances regarding unsafe conditions using existing contract language.
- See that training is provided through inservice days.
- Assure that the district complies with the N.J. Public Employee Occupational Safety and Health Act (PEOSH).
- Work with parent and community groups to eliminate and/or prevent hazardous conditions.

## For Assistance:

- Contact your association representative immediately. Your local or the NJEA UniServ office can help you with Workers' Compensation. You are entitled under state law (N.J.S.A.18A:30-2.1) "...to full salary without loss of sick days for up to one year..." and all medical treatment.