Violence Against Administrators: Retention, Training Needs, and Policy Recommendations

Violence against school practitioners and staff is a pressing national issue. Over the past two decades, teacher-directed violence has received increasing attention from researchers and lawmakers. However, little is known about administrators' experiences with violence and aggression in schools. As leaders of the school community responsible for daily operations, student learning, as well as student and staff well-being, school administrators are of central importance. When school leaders feel unsafe, there can be downstream effects on the entire school community.

In 2019, the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Violence Against Educators and School Personnel was convened to study violence against teachers, administrators, school psychologists, social workers, counselors, and school staff. The APA Task Force collected nationally representative, quantitative and qualitative survey data at three timepoints in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), and MCH Strategic Data. This policy brief reports on school administrator data collected in Spring, 2023, which is the third and most recent data collection.

Online surveys were completed by a national sample of 507 pre-K-12th grade school administrators, including principals, vice/assistant principals, deans, and other school leaders. In the 2022-2023 school year, **more than half (54%) of the administrators were victims of physical violence. Nearly all administrators (92%) were verbally threatened, and 38% were considering transfers or leaving the profession.** These findings are illustrated and described below.

How Prevalent Is Violence Against School Administrators?

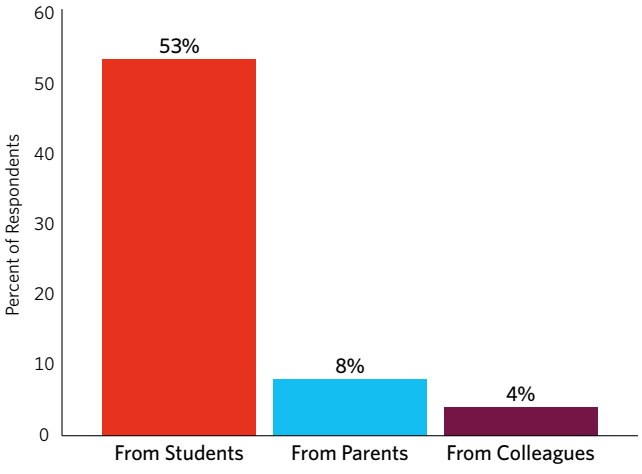
Physical Violence

Across all aggressors, **54% of administrators reported physical victimization** at least once during the academic year. Physical violence entailed physical attacks (e.g., bitten, scratched, hit), objects thrown, or ordinary objects like scissors and pencils being weaponized. Prevalence of physical violence from student aggressors was particularly notable (see Figure 1).

Verbal and Threatening Violence

Ninety-two percent of administrators experienced at least one incident of verbal or threatening violence (e.g., verbal attacks, threats, intimidation, sexual harassment, bullying) across all aggressors during the academic year. This type of violence was particularly common from parents and students (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 1. PREVALENCE OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE RATES BY AGGRESSOR



Note. Participants experienced at least one of the three types of physical violence (physical attacks, objects thrown, objects weaponized). For those who did report violence, they typically did not experience it more than once.

Do Administrators Want to Transfer Schools or Leave Education?

Many school administrators were thinking about leaving their jobs and the profession based on experiences with violence and school climate concerns. **Thirty-eight percent reported wanting or planning to quit or transfer.** When examining the transfer and quit rates separately, 21% of respondents indicated they wanted or planned to transfer positions, and 28% indicated they wanted or planned to retire early or quit the profession (see Figure 3). Although not all desires and plans to leave lead to attrition, these findings suggest that there are high rates of job dissatisfaction among school administrators, which may be exacerbated by experiences of violence.

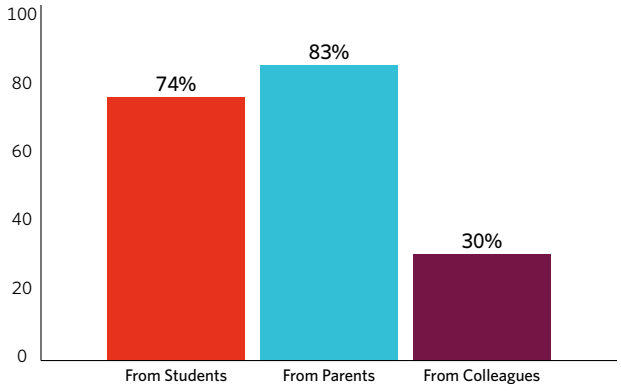
What Kinds of Training Do Administrators Need?

Administrators reported that they or their staff need additional professional development, training, mentoring, or other support on a range of classroom and school practices. As seen in Figure 4, more than 65% of administrators reported a variety of training needs. Notably, de-escalation was the most highly endorsed training need, with 72% of all school administrators requesting further instruction on this strategy—potentially underscoring considerable concerns about physical violence.

What Can School Practitioners, Local Policymakers, and Federal Lawmakers Do?

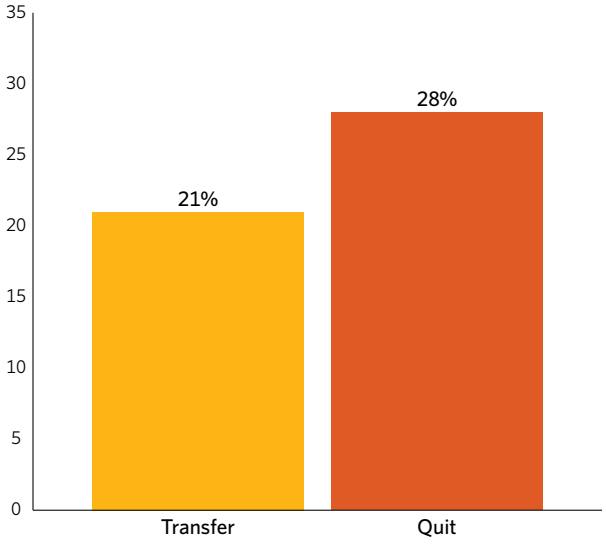
Increased training and support may reduce administrator turnover and victimization. Schools will be safer if resources and working conditions are improved for administrators, as well as other staff and students who are impacted by violence. Improving safety requires actions by school practitioners and local school policymakers, as well as federal and state lawmakers.

FIGURE 2. PREVALENCE OF VERBAL AND THREATENING VIOLENCE RATES BY AGGRESSOR



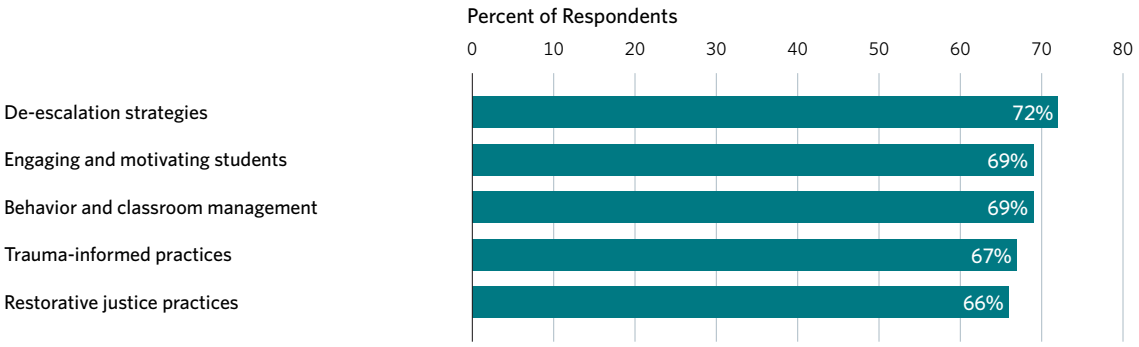
Note. Participants experienced at least one of the following types of verbal and threatening violence: obscene remarks or gestures, intimidation, slurs or verbal attacks based on identity, verbal threats, public humiliation, bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment. For those who did report violence, they typically did not experience it more than once.

FIGURE 3. PERCENT OF ADMINISTRATORS REPORTING DESIRE OR PLANS TO TRANSFER OR QUIT



Note. Percent was calculated based upon participants who indicated "agree" or "strongly agree" with at least one item.

FIGURE 4. TOP FIVE MOST HIGHLY ENDORSED TRAINING NEEDS



Note. Participants responded "yes" or "no" to whether they felt they or their staff needed additional training in 19 strategies. The full list of training needs can be found in the technical report (p. 11).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL PRACTITIONERS AND POLICYMAKERS.

We present recommendations for administrators, school staff, school boards, district officials, state departments of education, and municipal and state legislators to improve training, organizational functioning, and school safety. Administrator safety and well-being should be considered alongside current prevention efforts for students and educators.

Enhance comprehensive, high-quality training opportunities

- Leverage university, community, and professional organization partnerships to increase comprehensive training and capacity building at all levels of staff, including leadership.
- Evaluate training practices and outcomes; incorporate feedback from staff on the most engaging, translatable, and effective methods of training.

Improve organizational functioning

- Increase resources to support the well-being of students and staff (e.g., social workers, school psychologists, counselors, paraprofessionals).
- Tailor and expand school-based mental health services to students, staff, teachers, and administrators.
- Adopt programs and implement events to improve parent-staff and school-community relationships.
- Consult with local and national organizations to increase school resources and influence local policies.

Assess and intervene to improve safety and reduce school personnel attrition

- Assess student, educator, staff, and administrator experiences of verbal, threatening, and physical violence, training needs, and recommendations annually.
- Fund and use empirically validated schoolwide approaches to prevent and address school-based violence, including violence against administrators.
- Improve school climate, including the use of positive reinforcement, incentives, and support; enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FEDERAL AND STATE LAWMAKERS

School safety and leadership retention can be supported through effective schoolwide violence prevention programming, leadership training, mental health services for adult stakeholders, student loan forgiveness, higher salaries commensurate with the intensive job responsibilities, and financial incentives. The legislation and programs below are federal in scope, but state lawmakers should consider similar legislation to bolster school safety and strengthen educator pipelines, including administrator retention.

Grow a diverse educator workforce and support the mental health and well-being of school administrators, staff, and students

- **Educators for America Act.** Would provide $1 billion per year to foster a diverse, well-trained educator pipeline, including principals, teachers, and support staff.
- **Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act.** Would create financial mechanisms to introduce evidence-based mental health programs in schools.

Increase funding for programs that train educators and administrators

- **Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants Program, Title II-A.** Grants states and school districts with formula funding for the professional learning and leadership skills of educators and school leaders.
- **Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Grant Program.** Provides for teacher professional development, including in areas of child development and social and emotional learning strategies.

Create sustainable pathways to meet the mental and behavioral health needs of students

- **Mental Health Services for Students Act.** Would build partnerships between local educational agencies, tribal schools, and community-based organizations to provide school-based mental health care for students, including training on preventing and de-escalating crisis.
- **CARE for Student Mental Health Act.** Would increase the number of qualified school-based mental health service professionals by providing financial support to high-need school districts for the recruitment, hiring, and retention of mental health personnel.

Invest in school-based mental health services

- **Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program, Title IV-A.** Funds school districts' efforts to improve school conditions and climate through enhanced mental health services, social and emotional learning, and trauma-informed practices.
- **Safe and Supportive Schools National Initiatives.** Addresses the health and well-being of students, school safety, and emergency preparedness, including a focus on mental and emotional well-being and development.
- ***Project AWARE.*** Provides grants to increase awareness of mental health issues among students, train school personnel and other adults on students' mental and emotional health concerns, and connect students and families to behavioral health services.

For more information about this study and the data presented in this brief, please see the Technical Report. For further information about the overall study and associated publications, please refer to the American Psychological Association Task Force on Violence Against Educators and School Personnel website. For additional information please contact Nicole Barnes, PhD, Senior Director for the Center for Psychology in Schools and Education: nbarnes@apa.org.

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See also:
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