

Association of Teachers and Lecturers
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Violent pupils and parents make teachers lives a misery - ATL

Nearly one quarter of school and college staff have endured physical violence from a student, and just under 40 per cent have been confronted by an aggressive parent or guardian, according to a survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL). The survey questioned over 1,000 teachers, lecturers, support staff and school leaders in schools and colleges across the United Kingdom about behaviour issues in the classroom.

Over 40 per cent of the respondents felt that student behaviour had got worse the past two years, and 58 per cent believed it had worsened over the past five years. Eighty-seven per cent of staff had dealt with a disruptive student during the 2008-09 school year, and nearly 90 per cent of these cases involved low level disruption such as talking in class, not paying attention or horsing around.

Over a third of respondents in primary schools reported incidents of violent student behaviour such as punching and kicking, compared to 20 per cent of teachers in secondary schools.

A primary school teacher in England reported physical abuse from students as young as five years old: "I and other members of staff were physically assaulted daily by a five-year-old (including head-butting, punching etc.). He was taken to the head to 'calm down' then brought back to apologise. It became a vicious circle. I was off sick as a result. People often underestimate that young children can be as violent and intimidating as the older ones."

Another primary school teacher in England said: "A six-year-old completely trashed the staff room, put a knife through a computer screen, attacked staff and we had to call the police. Another six-year-old attacked staff and pupils with the teacher's scissors."

Sixth form and FE teachers experienced a higher level of disrespectful behaviour in the classroom, with over 85 per cent of respondents reporting the use of mobile phones during class and students ignoring teachers' requests.

Most staff regard poor student behaviour as a routine interference during class, with 96 per cent of teachers reporting that poor behaviour had led to a disruption of work for other students. Over a third of members have experienced a loss of confidence after dealing with poor behaviour, and a fifth of staff experienced mental health problems, including stress and anxiety.

"Persistent low-level rudeness and disruption seems to have become a fact of life in education today and no longer raises eyebrows or seems to merit special attention. A sad state of affairs," said Dr Ian Lancaster, a secondary school teacher from Cheshire.

Teachers generally feel that behaviour policies in their schools are adequate, but say they are not often carried out consistently by staff, so students feel that they are able to get away with bad behaviour in certain situations. Over a third of staff were unhappy with how their school or college dealt with behaviour related problems.

A teacher from an independent secondary school in Staffordshire said: "We have a clear behaviour policy, but too often it is not enforced by all members of staff. This sends out a mixed message to students and they know who they can defy and who won't bother to follow up on incidents of rudeness and contempt."

Alarming, nearly 40 per cent of those surveyed had experienced some form of aggression from a student's parents or guardians. In most cases this was in the form of insults or derogatory comments,

and intimidation such as threats or being sworn at. Although 87 per cent of staff told their school about incidents where students' parents or guardians had been aggressive, a fifth felt the school did not provide adequate support.

Teachers reported that in most cases aggression from parents or guardians is in response to their children being disciplined in class or for their child receiving poor grades. The behaviour of the parents or guardians is often reflected in the student's behaviour.

A secondary teacher in Bristol, said: "Lack of support of teachers by parents is the most disheartening part of this profession and the thing most likely to make me leave it. Poor student behaviour reflects the standards that they see at home and children cannot be held completely accountable for the values (or lack of) instilled in them at home."

Some teachers believe that to eliminate poor behaviour in schools it is essential to first find the reasons behind unruly behaviour and then determine a solution, rather than reprimand students after instances of challenging behaviour.

ATL general secretary, Dr Mary Boustead said: "It is distressing that poor student behaviour continues to be a widespread problem in schools, and shocking that over a third of teaching staff have experienced aggression from students' parents or guardians. ATL firmly believes that no member of staff should be subjected to violent behaviour by either students or parents. Parents should be acting as good role models by supporting staff and helping them create a more positive learning environment for their children."

ENDS

ATL surveyed over 1,000 primary, secondary, and further education school teachers in the UK between 27 February and 9 March 2009.

Key survey results:

Do staff believe student behaviour has changed over the past 2 years?	Better 4.7 %	Worse 43.4 %	The same 47.2%	Don't know 4.7 %
Do staff believe student behaviour has changed over the past 5 years?	Better 3.8%	Worse 57.5%	The same 26.8%	Don't know 12.0%
Have staff dealt with disruptive students over the current academic year?	Yes 87.3%	No 12.7%		
If staff have dealt with disruptive behaviour, what form did it take? (ticking all that apply)				
Low level disruption (talking, not paying attention, horsing around)	89.8%			
Disrespect (use of mobile phone in class, ignoring teacher's requests)	77.8%			
Verbal (insults, derogatory comments)	52.8%			
Intimidation (threats, shouting, being sworn at)	37.1%			
Physical aggression	23.5%			
Other	4.9%			
If staff have dealt with a disruptive student, what form did it take? (ticking all that apply)				
Spitting	25.7%			
Fists (punching)	63.4%			
Legs (kicking)	62.7%			
Knives (stabbing/attempting to stab)	1.5%			
Other	28.0%			
Dealing with a disruptive student has caused teachers: (ticking all that apply)				
Disruption of work or class	95.8%			
Loss of confidence at school/college	35.3%			
Refusing to teach a student	14.0%			
Mental health problems (i.e. stress)	20.6%			
Physical harm (bodily harm)	6.4%			
Taking leave from work	5.0%			
Visit to the doctor	6.9%			
Other	3.7%			
Did teachers report serious incidents of	Yes	No		

poor behaviour by students to their school/college?	90.3%	9.7%	
Were staff happy with the way their school/college dealt with the incidents of disruptive student behaviour?	Yes- totally 33.8%	Yes- partially 47.8%	No 18.4%
Have staff ever faced aggression from a student's parent/guardian or family member?	Yes 39.4%	No 60.6%	
If staff have faced an aggressive parent/guardian or family member, what form did it take: (ticking all that apply) Verbal (insults, derogatory comments) Intimidation (threats, shouting, being sworn at) Physical violence Other	83.4% 54.9% 3.7% 5.3%		
Dealing with aggressive parents/guardians or family members has caused staff: (ticking all that apply) Mental health problems (i.e. stress, anxiety) Loss of confidence working in school/college Refusing to teach a student Physical harm (bodily harm) Taking leave from work Visit to the doctor Other	49.8% 65.2% 11.6% 1.7% 5.6% 6.9% 9.0%		
Did teachers report incidents of aggressive parents/guardians or family members to their school/college:	Yes 86.5%	No 13.5%	
Have teachers ever considered changing professions because of poor behaviour by: Students Student's parents/guardians or family members	Yes 45.0% 15.3%	No 55.0% 84.7%	
Do teachers feel their school/college provides adequate support when staff report incidents of poor behaviour by: Students Student's parents/guardians or family members	Yes 56.3% 50.9%	No 36.4% 20.9%	Don't know 7.4% 28.2%

Note to editors:

1. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers' Annual Conference is taking place at the BT Conference Centre, Liverpool from Monday 6 to Thursday 9 April 2009.
2. The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, headteachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom.
3. ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice.
4. ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). The union is a member of the Social Partnership – working with the UK Government, employers and other unions on education issues. ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.