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Violence and harassment in schools: Union calls on employers to take action

The Independent Education Union calls on non-government school employers to provide clear data on rates of violence and harassment in schools, and to implement stronger measures to ensure teachers and support staff are safe from rising rates of violence and harassment.

“Our members are reporting increasing incidents of violence and sexual harassment by students directed towards teachers and other staff in schools, and we are calling on their employers to produce a clear picture of what is happening and what they’re doing about it,” said IEUA NSW/ACT Branch Deputy Secretary David Towson.

The Independent Education Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch represents more than 32,000 staff in Catholic and independent schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges.

The union wrote to all Catholic Dioceses and the Association of Independent Schools on 23 August seeking meetings on this issue. Some are yet to respond.

At the weekend, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on new figures from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research showing that in the year to June, there had been almost 2300 assaults occur on public and private school premises, which is only just below 2460 the year before ([Students assaulting multiple staff, carrying weapons: NSW schools’ behaviour crisis](#), SMH, 29 Sep 2024). Incidents of intimidation and stalking are increasing, as are reports of sexual touching. Possession of weapons is on the rise, and police are being called to schools more frequently.

“This problem is escalating in all school sectors and it is unacceptable,” Towson said.

“We call on employers to provide confidential reporting mechanisms, prompt and thorough investigations and appropriate action against perpetrators.

“We’re also asking for training programs for all staff and students to raise awareness about harassment and its impact, as well as strategies for prevention and intervention.”

All working people are entitled to a safe workplace, and the Respect@Work reforms, passed in late 2022, impose a positive duty on employers to eliminate unlawful behaviour. Unlawful behaviour includes not just sex discrimination but also sexual harassment, conduct that creates a hostile workplace on the grounds of sex, and related acts of victimisation.

“This positive duty imposes a legal obligation on employers to take meaningful action to prevent unlawful conduct in the workplace, including behaviour by students towards employees,” Towson said. “We urge all non-government school employers to clarify the extent of the problem and to take real action to create the safe, respectful and inclusive workplaces to which all staff are entitled.”

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The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch represents over 32,000 teachers, principals and support staff in Catholic and independent schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges.

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