

Behaviour in Scotland's schools

Introduction

This short briefing summarises the key findings across Scotland from the NASUWT's Behaviour in Schools report. The report was developed in response to data gathered from the Union's Big Question Survey, alongside statistics taken from casework records, which show growing concern over violent and abusive pupil behaviour in schools.

The report explores:

- the evidence gathered through our research;
- the voices of Scottish teachers and their lived experiences;
- a set of recommendations across the education system, including actions for us as a union, and the expectations we will place on schools, local authorities and governments.

Our approach

We conducted a snapshot online survey across the UK in the final term of the 2022/23 academic year, which was completed by 358 members of the NASUWT in Scotland. The survey was distributed via electronic communication methods.

Results from this data collection have been compiled to produce the following report, focused exclusively on the returns from members in Scotland.

As well as quantitative data, the survey offered opportunities for respondents to share lived experiences and opinions through free text options. These have been used throughout this report to share the voices of classroom teachers.

Key findings

What types of behaviour are being exhibited?

In the last 12 months:

- 39% of respondents have experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils in the last 12 months;
- 94% report verbal abuse or violence from pupils;
- backchat and rudeness are the most common behaviours, reported by 96% of respondents; and
- being sworn at is cited by 87% of members.

With regard to physical violence, 17% of teachers have been hit or punched, 10% have been kicked, and 36% have been shoved or barged. Eight per cent have been spat at, while 2% have been headbutted.

Specific experiences include a teacher who was hit in the abdomen by a window pole. There are multiple reports of furniture, including chairs, being thrown across the classroom, and a report from a teacher who was attacked with a scooter and kicked in the chest, resulting in unconsciousness.

How old are the pupils involved?

- The most likely age bracket to demonstrate physical or verbal abuse is 12 to 14, which was identified by 75% of participants.
- The 15-16 age bracket was the second most likely, selected by over half (51%) of participants.

How often is this happening?

Physical abuse:

In the last 12 months:

- 29% report incidents once a year, with 28% stating they occur once a term; and
- 12% say once a month, 5% once a fortnight, 6% once a week, 14% several times per week, and 5% daily.

Ninety-three per cent feel the number of pupils exhibiting violent and abusive behaviours has increased.

Verbal abuse:

In the last 12 months:

- 2% report verbal abuse as happening once a year, 13% once a term; and
- 17% say once a month, 10% once a fortnight, 17% once a week, 23% several times a week, and 18% daily.

Ninety-five per cent say the number of pupils verbally abusing staff members has increased.

What is the impact of this verbal or physical abuse?

- The most common result (83%) was that it was affecting the individual's morale and enthusiasm for their job.
- 67% experienced stress and more than half (53%) experienced anxiety.
- 21% reported suffering with depression.
- 10% took time off work due to the mental health issues they suffered, with 12% taking time off work due to stress.

More than one in two (57%) said they felt less confident in working with pupils.

Attrition from the teaching profession is a worrying outcome. Two per cent of respondents have confirmed with their employer they will be leaving teaching, while 46% suggest they are seriously considering leaving the profession.

Do teachers report the incidents?

- Less than half of respondents (43%) reported all of the incidents to their manager in their school or college.
- A third (34%) reported most incidents, while 21% only reported some.
- A minority, 3%, did not report any of the incidents.

When asked about the reason for not reporting incidents, the reason cited most often was that teachers did not think anything would be done about it (80%).

Almost six in ten (57%) of respondents said the process for reporting behaviour incidents is too time consuming or bureaucratic, while 42% were concerned their capability would be called into question.

What was the outcome?

Of those incidents that were reported:

- 31% said some incidents were dealt with appropriately, though others were not;
- a quarter felt some incidents were dealt with appropriately, but sufficient action was not taken with these;
- just 8% said appropriate action was always taken, and the individual felt supported by their school or college; and
- 11% said no action was taken by their school or college, while an additional one in 20 (4%) were not informed of the outcome of the incident(s) after reporting.

"[The] outcome was not satisfactory; pupil was allowed back in my class after a week. [I'm] still mocked about the incident by pupil."

"Pupils are given constant warnings, staff don't receive feedback or any resolution to behaviour."

How are behaviour management policies being used?

Nearly three-quarters (72%) stated that their school has a behaviour management policy. When asked if that policy is enforced:

- 5% said always;
- 19% said usually;
- 43% said sometimes;
- 28% said rarely; and
- 5% said never.

When a pupil behaviour issue is referred to managers, only 3% of teachers feel they always receive feedback about the outcome and how the pupil has been dealt with. Less than a fifth (15%) say they usually do.

The largest proportions – 32% and 38% – say they sometimes do, or rarely do, respectively. Twelve per cent say they never do.

Forty-four per cent say they only sometimes feel they receive support in a timely manner when they have asked for help from managers to deal with a pupil behaviour issue.

Eighteen per cent say usually, while around a quarter (28%) say rarely. Only 6% answered that they always receive support in a timely manner, while 4% say they never do.

What else do we know about teachers' current experiences?

Over half (55%) strongly agree or agree that they are made to feel to blame if they have an issue with poor pupil behaviour.

Sixty-seven per cent also said that the culture in their school is that poor pupil behaviour is part of the job and they should expect to receive abuse/violence from pupils.

The same percentage – 67% – do not feel supported by their school's approach to dealing with poor pupil behaviour.

Less than one in ten (7%) of respondents feel their setting's approach to pupil behaviour management empowers them as a teacher or leader.

More than three-quarters (83%) of respondents do not feel they have the resources, support and knowledge to meet the behavioural needs of all the pupils they teach.

When asked about the number of pupils respondents do not feel they receive adequate support to teach because of their behavioural needs, more than four in five (88%) feel this has increased in the last year.

What are the factors affecting pupil behaviour?

- Use of restorative behaviour programmes that are ineffective is cited by most respondents, with 79% of members raising this.
- More than three-quarters of respondents identified lack of proper policies and procedures to deter unacceptable behaviour (76%), while 67% cited a lack of support from Senior Management for classroom teachers.
- 61% suggest it is linked to poor socialisation skills following COVID restrictions.

Where respondents specified other reasons, there were a number of repeated themes:

- a lack of understanding by pupils of their responsibilities, not just their rights;
- the introduction of 'no exclusion' policies or a perception that national/Government policy has made exclusions "impossible";
- being distracted by mobile phones and social media, and copying unacceptable behaviour seen on social media;
- little or no classroom assistants or support in the class for pupils with Additional Support Needs (ASN);
- lack of parental support; and
- a lack of consequences for pupils' inappropriate behaviour.

What actions do teachers and leaders feel are needed to support them in meeting the behavioural needs of all the pupils they teach?

- More than eight in ten (84%) suggest pupils with behavioural issues being moved into specialist provision that better meets their needs.
- More support and engagement from parents/carers was identified as the second most important action, cited by 70%.
- More external support was identified by more than half (60%), and more support and assistance from school leaders was cited by the same number (60%).

Other themes consistently identified in the commentary included:

- consistency in use of sanctions, and not being afraid to use sanctions;
- the need for effective consequences for unacceptable behaviour;
- a whole-school approach to behaviour management;
- better pastoral care or mental health support for pupils; and
- better support from local government.

Recommendations

What do we want the Scottish Government to do?

1. As part of its forthcoming National Summit on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools, to prioritise the views of teachers who are experiencing significant issues with pupil behaviour and act on their suggestions. This should include the following, as a minimum:
2. Strengthen national guidance on behaviour management to ensure there is clear messaging on, for example, the unacceptability of violent and abusive behaviour and that appropriate consequences for inappropriate behaviour should be applied, including pupil exclusion where absolutely necessary.
3. Ensure that all schools have a behaviour management policy, based on this national guidance, which has been discussed and agreed with staff.
4. Where restorative behaviour approaches are used as part of such policies, that these are also agreed with staff and, rather than being seen in isolation, are part of a wider suite of behaviour management approaches, which include the ability to escalate to Senior Management and the possibility of more serious consequences.
5. Establish a consistent system for monitoring, recording and responding to incidents of abuse/violence in schools.
6. Ensure that a system of appropriate support is available to staff who experience incidents of abuse/violence.
7. Commission independent research on the causes of poor behaviour in schools, including any specific pandemic-related issues.
8. Develop a wide-ranging programme of professional development opportunities on behaviour management for school staff which reflects the various successful approaches to this being used (in Scotland and elsewhere).
9. Ensure that Education Scotland and its school inspectors give appropriate support on behaviour management to schools and teachers, in light of the above.
10. Provide clear guidance on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) when adopted into Scots law, especially on what schools should do when the rights of different children conflict with each other.
11. Recognise that schools alone cannot address all the reasons for poor pupil behaviour and take broader actions which will help schools: such as ensuring that every school across Scotland has access to a school-based counsellor and expanding the provision of free school meals in Scotland to all pupils.

What will the NASUWT do?

Work with the Scottish Government and others

1. Our lobbying of the Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills was instrumental in getting the Scottish Government to acknowledge the scale of the problem with pupil behaviour, leading to the announcement of a national summit, while our engagement with the Scottish Parliament Education Committee since then has influenced the Agenda for that summit. As well as taking our place at the national summit, sharing member experiences/views and seeking to secure improved approaches to dealing with unacceptable pupil behaviour, we will continue to engage with MSPs and local Councillors outside of that forum to seek to influence change.
2. We will also continue to look for opportunities to work with national organisations that can make a positive difference in this area, such as the Safer Internet Centre, which helps to promote the safe and responsible use of technology and social media for young people.

3. We also want to work with individual local authorities and/or schools to ensure that they develop appropriate behaviour management policies using our established principles:
<https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/in-the-classroom/behaviour-management-for-teachers-in-the-classroom/developing-a-behaviour-management-policy.html>.

Develop further advice to support members

4. In response to the significant levels of concern over ineffective restorative behaviour approaches, the NASUWT is developing dedicated advice on this. We will set out a framework to support good practice in schools that do wish to explore restorative behaviour, or need to improve their existing processes.
5. The issue of vaping is growing in schools and is often linked to behaviour that challenges. The NASUWT will research this issue further and subsequently explore the support that members need to address this.
6. We will continue to refresh and promote the Union's suite of behaviour management resources and look at ways to communicate these to members utilising different mediums, including through training sessions.

Continue our commitment to existing campaigns

7. Given the widespread misunderstandings of the UNCRC and how it might apply when there are clashes between the rights of different children, the Union has provided members with guidance around behaviour and the UNCRC which is accessible here: **<https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/in-the-classroom/children-and-young-people/united-nations-convention-rights-of-child-scotland.html>**. We will continue to campaign for the Scottish Government and others to produce appropriate advice and guidance to schools and teachers when the UNCRC is eventually adopted into Scots law.
8. Continue to pressurise the Scottish Government and COSLA to implement the promised reduction in pupil class contact time for Scotland's teachers, promised in the SNP's election manifesto and listed as an aim of the current programme for Government.
9. Continue to make the evidence-based case for smaller class sizes.
10. Continue our partnership work with Citizens UK and BACP, championing the need for access to school-based counsellors across all schools.

What can schools do in the meantime?

1. Work with NASUWT Representatives to review existing behaviour management policies and ensure they are fit for purpose.
2. Ensure the consistent application of behaviour management policies, with the adoption of a whole-school approach.
3. Ensure parents are aware of the behaviour management policy, including the role that pupils and parents play in creating a positive school environment.
4. Carry out a review of restorative behaviour approaches, their appropriateness and the impact they are having on behaviour management and staff wellbeing.

About the NASUWT

The NASUWT – The Teachers' Union – represents teachers and headteachers across the United Kingdom. We provide unrivalled protection, benefits and support for our members, from professional advice and legal support and free training.

By 'putting teachers first', the NASUWT works to enhance the status of the teaching profession to deliver real improvements to teachers' working lives, seeking to ensure they are recognised and rewarded as highly skilled professionals with working conditions that enable them to focus on their core role of teaching.

For more information, visit www.nasuwt.org.uk



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