

Ontario College of Teachers' Survey: Cyberbullying at the Forefront of Teacher Concerns

84 per cent of teachers have been cyberbullied

by Lois Browne*

Cyberbullying students have targeted the vast majority of Ontario's 210,000 certified teachers, seeking to embarrass and intimidate them with criticism of their appearance and their grading skills, malicious gossip and threats of physical harm.

That's what 1,000 members of the College said in the College's fifth annual State of the Teaching Profession survey, conducted by phone in July.

On a number of issues, the perspective of French-language respondents differed markedly from that of their English-language counterparts. This included more reporting of students targeted by cyberbullies and a greater desire for schools or boards to sanction cyberbullies, coupled with less desire to involve the police.

French-language respondents also indicated a more sanguine attitude to changes in the quality of classroom life and the impact of capping primary-class sizes.

Cyberbullies

Eighty-four per cent of elementary and secondary teachers say they have definitely been the subject of cyberbullying. Among secondary school teachers who responded in French the problem is even more widespread, with 93 per cent saying they have been victimized.

Cyberbullies target teachers and other students via e-mail and text-messaging, in chat rooms, on blogs and on personal voting-booth web sites, sometimes employing photographs and video clips.

Teachers say they have either experienced or know of someone who has experienced:

- criticism of their clothing, appearance or mannerisms

- criticism of their fairness in grading
- malicious gossip
- a subtle threat of physical harm
- an explicit threat of physical harm.

Nearly 40 per cent of teachers believe that cyberbullying may lead to teachers leaving the profession and 28 per cent believe it contributes to students dropping out. Teachers also say it decreases classroom quality, affects job satisfaction and leads to poor student performance.

Those who think the impact is serious are in the minority, but their numbers suggest the issue could have a disruptive effect. Twenty per cent say that criticism of dress or mannerisms has the greatest impact. The majority of teachers believes that malicious gossip and threats of physical harm have no impact.

French-language respondents report bullying via e-mails and chat rooms to the same degree as teachers in general, but other forms to a much lesser extent.

Although more French-language respondents report being the victims of cyberbullying, they are less likely to believe that colleagues might leave the profession because of it.

Teachers aren't happy with the level of support they're getting in the use and misuse of electronic communication.

The majority say that not many schools have formal rules about the cyberbullying of teachers, and where rules do exist they are not necessarily well understood.

Teachers feel pretty much the same way whether it is students or teachers who are being harassed.

Only seven per cent say that the school or board can't do anything about it. Nearly half of teachers say their employer should sanction students who harass teachers online, and more than 40 per cent think the police should be called in for most or all incidents.

Teachers who responded in French prefer that the school or board deal with bullying (59 per cent) rather than calling in the police (30 per cent).

E-communication

A lack of clear, well-understood rules applies to the use of electronic communications between teachers and students.

While about half of teachers say that schools or boards have formal, well-understood policies on how students may use the Internet and e-mail, only about one-fifth say that the rules regarding teacher-student electronic communication are equally formal and well understood.

Among French-language respondents, teachers say that only about one in five schools has formal, well-understood rules. Compared to teachers overall, they also indicate there is less direction. Whether the lack of direction is the cause or there is some other reason, most teachers indicate they are adopting a cautious approach.

Only three per cent of teachers say they use e-mail communication regularly with their students while 83 per cent say they never do (80 per cent among French-language respondents). Teachers overall are more likely to use e-mail in communicating with parents, with only 60 per cent saying they never do (51 per cent among French-language respondents).

Challenging issues

Despite cyberbullying and uneasiness over the state of teaching, the majority of teachers don't see any of the challenges facing them as more than moderately serious.

Standardized testing continues as a leading concern, along with the condition of school facilities and school safety. A lack of respect for the profession and the integration of children with specialized needs into the classroom – both of which teachers have regarded as major challenges in the past – concern teachers only moderately today.

Among teachers overall, only 29 per cent think standardized testing is a serious challenge facing schools and 32 per cent and 31 per cent respectively regard the poor condition of school facilities and school safety as serious or very serious concerns.

Teachers who responded in French express the same concerns as teachers overall about testing, but on all

remaining issues they regard these concerns as less serious to a significant degree.

The percentage of teachers who definitely or probably see themselves as still in the profession five years from now continues to climb – from 65 per cent in 2003 to 79 per cent today. Among younger teachers – 18 to 34 years old – 97 per cent plan to still be teaching in five years. Ninety-three per cent of teachers who are 35 to 49 years old say they'll be staying put.

Public respect

Members of the College place teachers in the middle of a group of six occupations – including doctors, accountants, lawyers, real-estate agents and insurance agents – in terms of public respect. Doctors rank highest and insurance agents lowest in the public eye, according to teachers.

Members of the College who believe that teachers earn recognition commensurate with their qualifications slightly outnumber those who do not.

UNEASE UNDERLIES SATISFACTION

Cyberbullies don't seem to be extinguishing teacher enthusiasm for the job, since 79 per cent expect to be teachers in five years time. Add the 17 per cent who expect to retire in the same time period and it leaves only four per cent who may be considering a career change.

But there are signs of growing unease in the profession.

In 2006, teachers expressed high levels of confidence in the job they were doing, their school and the teaching profession.

This year, teachers indicate unexpectedly low levels of satisfaction. Only 78 per cent are happy with the job they are doing, while 70 per cent are satisfied with their school and 73 per cent are satisfied with the profession as a whole.

The same drop occurred with regard to the education system in general – 67 per cent expressed confidence in the system in 2006; only 54 per cent say they are satisfied with it in 2007.

UNEASE UNDERLIES SATISFACTION (cont'd)

The 2006 figures may reflect the era of peace and harmony introduced with the change in provincial governments that led to higher salaries and more money for literacy programs, books and other learning resources.

They may also reflect the fact that, demographically, the teaching profession is getting younger every year. Thousands of teachers are retiring each year in Ontario and are being replaced primarily by young, inexperienced teachers who spend their first few years riding a sharp learning curve.

CLASSROOM QUALITY AND SIZE

Overall, teachers are split evenly on whether classroom quality has improved, stayed the same or deteriorated over the past five years. French-language respondents differ sharply, however, with 41 per cent saying it has improved and only 18 per cent saying it has declined.

The reason for the difference may be in the policy of capping sizes for elementary grades, about which elementary teachers are much more positive.

In 2005, teachers said that large class size was the biggest problem confronting Ontario schools, and that reducing the size of classes would be the most helpful initiative in improving student learning, a policy that the provincial government began in 2003.

This year, 66 per cent of all teachers say that primary-class size has been capped and 68 per cent say the impact has been positive. French-language

respondents are much more enthusiastic, with 84 per cent saying the effect has been positive.

TEACHER OVERSUPPLY

In the past decade, the supply of teachers has swung from serious shortages in all areas to the current situation, in which there is an oversupply in all but specialized areas such as the sciences, mathematics, computer studies and French.

The length of time it takes some new teachers to find full-time permanent employment has increased to up to three years, while faculties of education in Ontario and the border colleges continue to graduate teacher candidates at a steady rate.

Teachers in general view the oversupply of teachers as a moderately serious or not very serious issue and don't support a targeted enrolment strategy by the faculties of education.

Only 15 per cent of teachers overall express strong support for some other means of controlling the number of newly licensed teachers to match the number or type of teaching jobs available, but 22 per cent of French-language respondents think it is important.

Not surprisingly, since French is one of the areas of instruction still in short supply, teachers who responded in French admit to a much lower level of awareness of the issue – only 11 per cent are very aware of it compared to 33 per cent of all teachers. However, a much larger percentage of French-language respondents who are aware of it believe it is a serious problem (37 per cent versus 25 per cent overall).

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