Working together to address workplace violence



Note: This story has been submitted by an SSTUWA member, who has chosen to remain anonymous.

When a student loses self-control, becomes verbally abusive and physically assaults staff it is traumatic for all involved.

The very nature of our profession we have chosen means we care for, teach and nurture children.

It is highly distressing to witness a child barricade themselves in a room and begin to thoroughly and systematically destroy their surroundings.

Inevitably a family member arrives and with the help of staff the student is physically carried, literally kicking and screaming, to a car.

The trauma touches all of us. Those who have been abused or assaulted. Those who were involved in managing the student. Those who witnessed the events, including young students who are now terrified because of the scenes that unfolded in front of them.

Our school dealt with this as a regular occurrence over four years: Staff kicked, punched, bitten, scratched and abused. Students assaulted, bullied, abused and put through the confusion of evacuating their classrooms. Teachers reporting feelings of fear, helplessness, anxiety and difficulty sleeping.

Despite dozens of programs being implemented, counselling, expert advice and assistance from health professionals the status quo remained.

As a union branch, with the support of our SSTUWA district organiser, we became organised around this issue. Our concerns were firmly fixed in two areas. The welfare of the child and the welfare of our staff and students.

With support and advice from the SSTUWA OSH organiser, the branch arranged training for OSH representatives and strongly supported our stand.

We invited members of two other unions that were represented at our school to join with us.

They agreed and signed our letter calling on the principal, under the OSH Act, to ensure the safety of all staff and that students could work safely without fear of violence.

We communicated with our own representatives and sought informed advice. And not least, we collated all documentation from the past four years. We documented our own experiences in letters to the principal, we wrote statements and collected photographs.

The letter also requested a review of programs and funding, and a copy was sent to the regional director.

A final report was sent to the principal, the regional director and the SSTUWA. We now had the support of three unions, the OSH Committee, our school's administration and our union leadership.

Within a week the issue was resolved. The student was placed in a more appropriate educational setting with specialist staff and more individualised learning program enacted.

Our school community once again began to enjoy the sense of fun and engagement of working with children to provide rich and meaningful educational experiences.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026