



**Queensland Association of Special Education Leaders
Leading Linking Learning**

QASEL POSITION BRIEF: AUGUST 2021

Subject: Occupational Violence in Schools

This brief seeks to clarify QASEL's position in relation to occupational violence (OV) in schools. QASEL welcomes the opportunity to actively contribute to ongoing conversations around this complex and challenging issue.

Background:

- The Queensland Government's [Code of Conduct for the Queensland Public Service](#) guides staff behaviour and interactions in all Queensland state schools and sites.
- The Department of Education's [Student Discipline Procedure](#) sets out the responsibilities and processes to promote safe, supportive and disciplined learning environments in Queensland state schools. It also provides guidance to schools in the development of their Student Code of Conduct.
- Each school's [Student Code of Conduct](#) clearly sets out expectations about staff responsibilities to support students to understand and meet discipline expectations of the school, and guidance on the application, where required, of disciplinary consequences.
- The [Parent and Community Code of Conduct](#) articulates conduct expected of parents, carers and visitors while they're on state school grounds, at school activities, and interacting with others in the school community.
- In 2018, the Department of Education released the [Occupational Violence Prevention Procedure](#). The procedure provides the minimum standard for the prevention and management of occupational violence risks.
- The annual [Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey 2019](#) (Riley, See, Marsh, & Dicke, 2020) tracks and highlights growing trends for our school leaders across a wide range of psychosocial indices. The survey also looks at the exposure of our school leaders to offensive behaviour. The 2019 survey results indicated:
 - over 84% of school leaders reported being subjected to an offensive behaviour over the last year
 - 51% of school leaders reported having received threats of violence
 - over 42% of school leaders have been exposed to physical violence.
- Paris et al (2021) conducted a research study that examines the levels of psychological distress (anxiety, depression, stress) and burnout, and their relationship to challenging behaviour amongst staff working in a special education setting. The results presented in this paper suggest that psychological distress prevalence amongst staff in special education settings is high.

Position:

- QASEL supports the position that all school staff have a right to attend a workplace that is safe from all types of harm. Similarly, students, families and community members also have a right to attend school sites and participate in school activities that are safe from harm.
- Staff working in special schools and special education contexts can, more frequently, be exposed to experiences or events that may be considered violent. At times, these acts are a function of a student's disability and are not intended by the student to cause harm to others.
- QASEL believes that behaviour is a form of communication. For students with disability, the outcome of the behaviour may not always align to the intended message of the student.
- Sometimes staff become involved in situations of OV when staff are seeking to support students who are in danger of self-harming themselves, and the staff member sustains an injury while attempting to support the health and wellbeing of a student.
- QASEL acknowledges that regardless of the intent of students, incidents that cause physical harm or psychological harm impact negatively on school staff. The cumulative effect of ongoing exposure to these incidents is also a concern for school-based staff. It is important that we recognise the risk of desensitising staff to OV through repeated exposure.
- Effective communication, clearer definitions and a shared vocabulary around OV as it relates to students with disability would benefit ongoing planning and problem solving.
- QASEL acknowledges that OV in relation to student behaviour is a complex issue that often requires high levels of collaboration across all stakeholders and effective communication to resolve these complex issues. A focus on providing appropriate learning programs, adjustments, accommodations and resources is critical. Dialogue that encourages binary thinking (e.g. zero tolerance approaches) is largely divisive and unconstructive.
- QASEL believes that incidents of occupational violence are under-reported in special education contexts. More effective mechanisms to capture incidents of occupational violence are necessary. Linking MyHR WH&S incident reports to OneSchool behaviour records could reduce workload and increase the accuracy of data.
- QASEL believes that OV that pertains to parent and community conduct can take many forms and is equally complex. Increasingly, school leaders and staff experience ongoing unreasonable behaviour from parents and community members that causes significant psychological harm due to the persistent nature of these behaviours.
- While the Department of Education's procedure on [Hostile people on school premises, wilful disturbance and trespass](#) provides options for Principals under the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 (Qld) (EGPA) to assist in preventing and managing unsafe situations, it is often underutilised and does not support school leaders adequately when dealing with persistent and ongoing parent or community member harassment.

Summary:

The health, safety and wellbeing of all members of the school community could be increased with a focus on prevention of occupational violence. Cross agency collaboration, meaningful dialogue, flexible and appropriate resourcing and effective systems and procedures all play a part in reducing the impact of OV in schools. QASEL appreciates the complexity of the issues surrounding OV and remains committed to proactively contributing to ongoing discussions and problem-solving activities that enhance the safety and wellbeing of all.