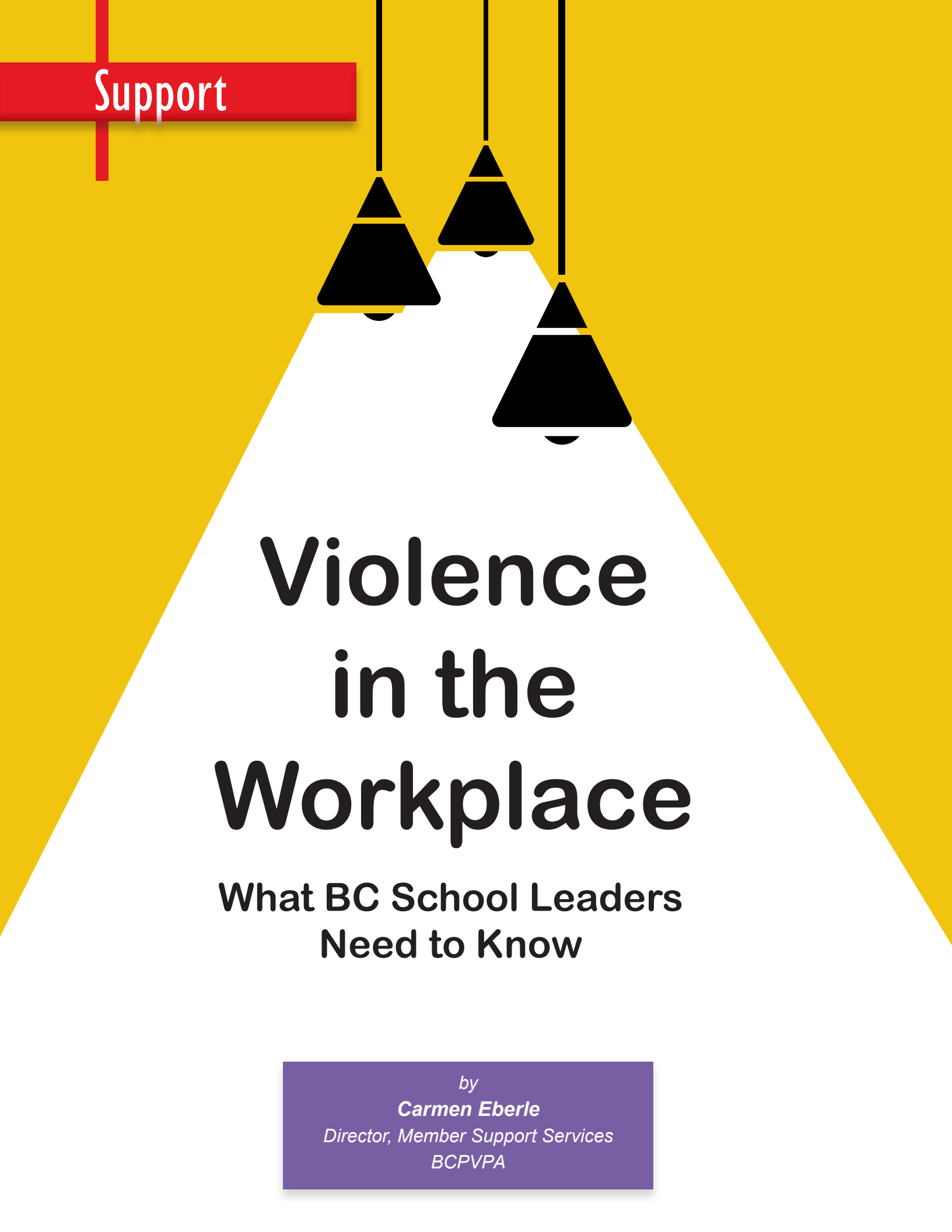




Support

Violence in the Workplace

What BC School Leaders
Need to Know

by

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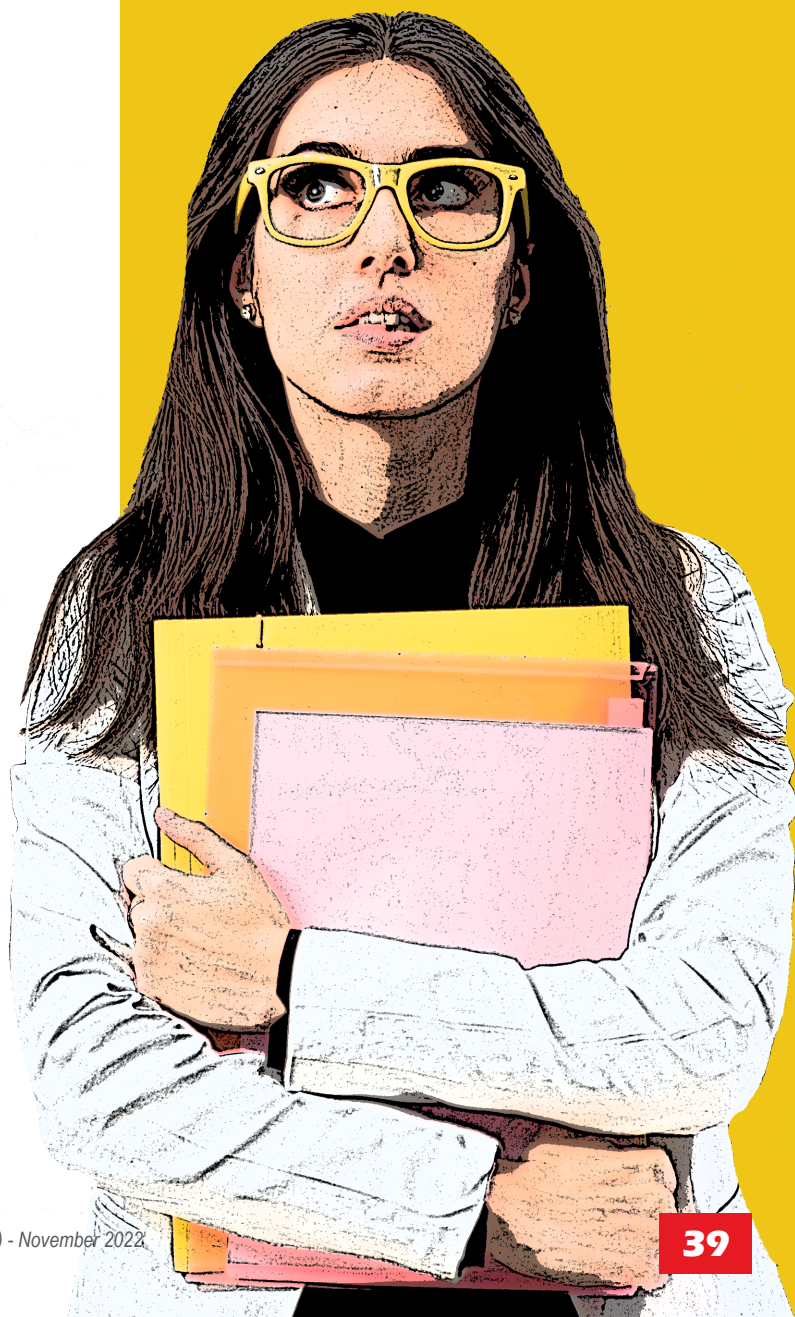
*Director, Member Support Services
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Over the span of a school-based administrative career, one becomes acutely aware of the potential for violence and the fiduciary responsibilities that come with protecting employees. As each school year unfolds, the accountability required to keep our employees safe from potential threats is clearly drawn alongside.

Our jobs are increasingly complex. Part of what we do involves working directly with individuals who – for various reasons – may act in a physically aggressive manner towards others. Ultimately, school leaders are responsible for ensuring that staff are equipped to create the environmental conditions conducive to learning, while also adhering to legislative requirements intended to mitigate risks. Striking the balance between inclusive education and safety is important. This article examines policy, administrative procedures, risk assessments, reporting procedures, corrective actions, and the necessity of post-incident debriefs. These are core elements of your response to challenging situations as a leader.

Professional Guidance Related to Violence in the Workplace

Before we outline administrators' statutory obligations, it is important to understand that violence in the workplace is defined as *"attempted or actual assaults, or any threatening statement or behavior, towards an employee of your company by any person other than a co-worker, which gives the employee reasonable cause to believe that they are at risk of injury."* (WorkSafeBC). 'Violence' can be a problematic term when used in relation to students who are neurodiverse; however, WorkSafeBC is clear that it is necessary to use this term for their purposes. Equipped with this definition of violence, we can review the regulations that will help mitigate risks and increase understanding of requirements related to violence in the workplace.



The information below is adapted from WorkSafeBC (Workers Compensation Board) "Take Care", June 2012.

District Policy and Administrative Procedures

The increase in WorkSafeBC claims for employees in schools can often be attributed to mental injury that may result from repeated exposure to violent acts that can occur when working with dysregulated students. In these scenarios, there can be a fear to report: employees may feel it is part of the job, worry about the repercussions of reporting, feel external pressure to not report, have a fear of damaging relationships, or even have a sense that reporting may not lead to effective change. Fortunately, all school districts have local policies to keep staff safe. Policies and procedures are important to our role as they govern what we do and relate to the administration of program, property, student, staff, and Board matters. Each district has health and safety guidelines that fall under policy and, in some cases, administrative procedures. Guidelines related to violence in the workplace may be centered around maintaining reports and record keeping. In advance of the school year, administrators are expected to prepare themselves to meet the statutory obligations in relation to WorkSafeBC by:

- Reviewing all district policies and administrative procedures related to violence prevention, and asking for clarification where required
- Establishing a Joint Health and Safety Committee as per district guidelines and WCB regulations
- Regularly reviewing, revising, updating, and monitoring Employee Safety Plans at the start of the year
- Including violence prevention materials in the staff handbook or Emergency Preparedness plan, and reviewing in detail at the first staff meeting

- Placing violence prevention policy and procedures in the Employee handbook

Some useful workplace violence prevention resources for the K-12 education workplace can be found on the WCB website bit.ly/WSBCPrevent, including supplementary videos, posters, prevention strategies, and reporting and risk assessment templates.

Importance of Adhering to Risk Assessment Protocols

Because of the wide range of potential situations where educators can be exposed to violent or aggressive behaviours, it is important to respond in a way that will prevent and reduce the risks towards staff and others. Factors to consider when assessing the risk are the context for the behaviour, the level of risk towards others, and the intensity and frequency of behaviors. With respect to the individual needs of students, the school environment, and the capacity or experience of staff working with students who have potential for violence must also be considered. Where students present a known challenging behaviour, completing a risk assessment helps everyone to better understand the degree of risk involved, who may be at risk and to what degree, and allows for sensitive management of the incidents.

Reporting as a Means of Prevention

Reporting violent incidents is crucial to prevention, and can protect you and your staff from future incidents. It is important to report the intensity and frequency of violent incidents – as well as near misses – so that districts can assist and respond in a timely manner. Reporting student violence can sometimes lead to additional supports or resources in the form of protective equipment, specialized training, or a potential increase of external and internal specialist support. The involvement of specialists can assist

schools to identify corrective measures that will reduce employee exposure to violent incidents. This may help school staff to identify trends and plan for specific times of the year, days of the week, or common operational situations where violence and aggression towards members of staff are more likely to occur. It is extremely important to:

- Instruct all staff to report any incidents of violence, physical or verbal threats
- Investigate all incidents of reportable behavior and identify the steps needed to avoid reoccurrence
- Initiate corrective action without delay and as reasonably possible
- Follow all district procedures on reporting incidents, including investigation notes, corrective actions, documentation of physician advice provided, and confirmation if treatment is sought
- Advise staff who report injuries or symptoms to consult a doctor

Surprisingly, many incidents of violence go unreported. Talking about the importance of reporting raises awareness. The more aware we are, the more likely it is that remedy and healthy working conditions can be achieved.

Corrective Actions

Corrective actions are focused on the identified issue and root cause. An example of violence that would require corrective action is when a community member verbally abuses a staff member. In this scenario, there is an obvious observed safety risk that requires timely corrective measures. Examples of immediate corrective measures could include initiating a de-escalating discussion, verbally requesting that the person remove themselves from



the situation, redirecting the person to a private space to express concerns away from staff members, and possibly establishing healthy boundaries for future respectful correspondence. In extreme cases, immediate corrective measures may involve a peace officer, and issuance of Section 177 of the School Act which *“prohibits the disturbance or interruption of school proceedings or official school functions, and authorizes principals and other school administrators to direct individuals to leave school property and to call for assistance from a peace officer if necessary.”* This action is rare, and applied only in extreme circumstances where school board approval may be necessary. An example of an extreme case is when an adult enters the school environment unannounced and proceeds to intimidate, verbally threaten, or act aggressively towards employees. In this example, police may also be notified to help identify the individual, and to recommend corrective actions up to and including criminal charges. Any time risks are identified, you as a supervisor – or the district as your employer – must take the necessary steps to minimize, if not eliminate, the risks. Some considerations include:

- Identifying workplace layout, lighting, triggers, egress routes, communication plans, proximity, training, equipment, and any identified concerns as reported in the risk assessment
- Informing new employees of hazards related to their employment; ensuring they have access to, and understanding of, any preventative procedures
- If the identified risk is a known individual, informing any staff likely to encounter the individual of the identity of the individual, nature of the risk, preventative procedures, and reporting protocols
- Directly addressing and setting behavioural expectations of any individual: staff, student, parent, guardian, or community member

- Reviewing policies, regulations, acts, OHS, and WCB guidelines
- Involving the employer or 911 as required

School leaders can reach out to the district Health and Safety Manager to assist with identifying issues and root causes to prevent reoccurrence.

Training and Safety Equipment Needs

Training and the use of personal protective equipment protects staff from physical harm that cannot be eliminated due to the nature of the work assigned. Appropriate equipment and training can keep you from being liable for your own and other staff members' injuries, because you are ensuring your duty to protect. An example of protective gear may include Kevlar sleeves to prevent injury from biting and scratching, or shin pads to prevent injury from kicking. To access protective intervention training for your school, seek assistance from the OHS Officer for your district. Some additional reminders:

- Regularly update Employee Safety Plans, and other identifiable resources
- Adequately train staff to carry out activities without posing a risk to themselves or others
- Work closely with the OHS Teams and, if relevant, the district Student Services Team to ensure support plans and risk management plans are implemented effectively
- Ensure all staff working directly with students who have the potential for violence are made aware of the Employee Safety Plan, and are provided with safety equipment and training relevant to their role in working with the student

Staff may require training and safety equipment support from specialist staff, district staff, or external

experts who can deliver appropriate trauma-informed, Violence Risk Threat Assessment, and non-violence crisis training relevant to prevention and intervention.

Cautionary Use of Restraints

At times, school leaders are involved in situations where they are asked to step in and calm a dysregulated student. In situations like these, pending a risk assessment, you may be required to have a Positive Behaviour Plan and/or Employee Safety Plan in place to clarify the different roles and responsibilities assigned. Often, Principals and Vice-Principals come in as a 'last resort' after staff have exhausted all other options. They may step into a situation that has been developing over time, and are now tasked with making difficult decisions regarding next steps. School leaders take varying approaches to calm the student, peers, and staff. If the use of restraints is being considered, District Policy must be followed. The use of restraints is a rare occurrence, and considered a last-resort, late-stage intervention whereby all other options for de-escalation have been exhausted, and imminent danger to cause serious harm to selves or others is evident. In very rare circumstances, one of the approaches that may be outlined in the safety plan is the use of restraints. Complaints may arise from observers, staff, and parents when a restraint is used. Typical complaints include undue force, lack of communication, and failure to follow safety plan guidelines; therefore, when entering an escalated situation, be mindful to:

- Have adequate training and safety equipment available to you and your staff
- Follow and review district's Policy and Administrative Procedures correctly and often
- Remain calm and act as a judicial parent would
- Do not 'interfere' when there are no signs of imminent danger to self or others



- Exhaust all possible strategies before engaging physically with a child
- Debrief incident in a timely manner with parent, appropriate district and school staff

In attending unknown, elevated situations, Principals are expected to make split-second decisions based on what they observe in the moment. All the while, the Principal is also considering the escalated student's well-being, the movement of students around them in the school, the history of the student, and the student's ability to co-regulate. Each situation is unique and can be highly emotional for everyone involved, including the Principal who is expected to remain calm and focused. It is not an easy task, even for Principals who have significant training and experience in this area.

To ensure you are prepared to deal with violence in the moment, school leaders need to take the time to read and understand the district's expectations for these situations. All districts are required by the Ministry of Education and Child Care to have a current restraint policy; administrators need to review this policy, and ask clarifying questions. Where a procedure is in place, it is crucial to be familiar with the guidelines around the use of restraints in schools. Districts are expected to provide information, training, and safety equipment as required.

Working Alone

All districts have specific working alone procedures. Educators have access to school sites, and many work early, on weekends, over breaks, and during the evening. Where there is risk of violence for employees working alone, employers must:

- Ensure that check-ins are made at reasonable intervals
- Identify employee location and method of check-in

- Establish reasonable length of time employee can work alone
- Determine if it is reasonable to allow employee to work alone, given the situation or location

Guidelines vary from location to location, so be sure to review procedures with staff so that they can make an informed choice. Working in isolation increases the risk for confrontations, and reduced access to supports if an injury or emergency occur, particularly if staff are working in the late evening. Be consistent in establishing procedures, and remember: these guidelines apply to you as well!

Post-Incident Debrief

Post-incident debrief discussions are intended to put a critical event into perspective. Although employees do not have to engage in a debrief following an incident, one should immediately be offered and proactive steps taken towards prevention. In some circumstances, a post-incident debrief may take place with the support of your critical event response team. Violence can have a significant impact on the physical and psychological health and safety of employees, and the debrief allows time for staff to process and receive access to support.

Next Steps....

School leaders have tremendous responsibility when it comes to preventing violence in the workplace, and we encourage you to reflect on the next steps that are needed to effectively implement district-wide and WSCB expectations. If you feel that there is a gap in systems or policies in your district, decide how you can use your voice and influence to provide the feedback that can contribute to everyone's safety. Challenge yourself as a leader to converse with curiosity, observe with purpose, and be responsive to the needs of your school and community.

In closing, all students have a right to equitable access to learning opportunities. Given the layers of complexity, it is important to navigate carefully and ensure that legal obligations are met and human rights are not violated in the process. If you don't know where to start or what to do next, ask for help. Approach someone in your district office, or at the BCPVPA office, for professional guidance. Your role is busy and complex, and being proactive can help you in potentially challenging situations.

**“Awareness means understanding
that workplace violence
can impact anyone, in any
setting, and across all
levels of employment.”**

Stephen J. Romano et al.

There are areas of the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) regulations and sections of the Workers Compensation Act (WCA) that pertain to violence in the workplace and dealing with employer, employee, and supervisory responsibilities. The references provided in this article are intended to help readers understand the importance of some of the health and safety requirements related to violence. Please refer to the specific sections of the OHS regulations, Workers Compensation Act, School Act, district policies, and administrative procedures to ensure that you are fully meeting your health and safety obligations.

Acts, Regulations and Policies are subject to change from the date this article was written and subsequently published.

