

Raging parents: The new schoolyard bullies

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Whether it's swearing at principals or barging into class to scold the teacher, Canadian schools say they are seeing a rising tide of Parent Rage.

"A growing number of parents seem very comfortable mouthing off at the school secretary, marching in and calling the teacher names — 'You f---ing so-and-so' — often in front of the children," said superintendent Rauda Dickinson, who oversees downtown schools for the Toronto District School Board.

"It's a form of parent bullying we're all disgusted to see on the ice rink, but principals and teachers put up with the same thing in schools," said the former principal.

"Probably once a week it happens that a parent can't control their rage over their kids' marks, or a discipline matter, or because they feel their child wasn't played enough during a game."

"Compared to a few years ago, it's everywhere."

While school officials say most parents are civil and co-operative, they note the same family tensions that can lead to road rage and rink rage can also erupt in schools.

There is mounting concern about parents behaving badly:

This month, Ontario teachers' unions will conduct the first major survey at both public and Catholic schools, asking staff whether they have been bullied or harassed by parents or students, verbally or physically.

The union survey was designed by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation at the request of its members, said federation vice-president Sherry Rosner.

"They told us at last fall's annual meeting that this issue is arising more and more and needs to be studied."

In a nationwide poll of school violence, the Canadian Teachers' Federation found 59 per cent of principals across the country in 2001 had witnessed at least one parent verbally abuse a teacher that year, and about 23 per cent had seen a parent physically assault or intimidate a teacher, said federation president Terry Price.

The rate was higher than average in northern and central Canada — including Ontario — and lower in eastern Canada.

"When I was young and the school called our home, my dad would ask me, 'What did you do?' Now, there's such a shift that many parents' first reaction is 'What did the

teacher do?" said Price. "They seem to want to lay the blame anywhere but with their own children.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario's head office gets calls every day from teachers seeking advice on how to deal with aggressive parents. The union has produced a special booklet called "Parent-Teacher Relationships: Putting the Pieces Together," which includes special tips on dealing with "parent harassment."

"It's not just sports parents who get abusive. Everyone thinks they're an expert on education because everyone has been to school," said the federation's Sharon O'Halloran, who offers legal advice to teachers dealing with aggressive parents. "Some parents yell and scream and hand out defamatory press releases against the teacher in the schoolyard — with copies to their MPP and the press.

"A generation ago, teachers and other authority figures were held in high regard. Now the pendulum has shifted and everyone is suspect."

The Ontario Principals' Council is concerned at the frequency with which parents threaten to sue schools over Ontario's new Safe Schools Act — both the parents of victims and the parents of bullies, said president Doug Acton. "Bullying is a real hot-button issue for parents. They can get angry if their child is disciplined, or angry if their child is bullied and the principal doesn't impose the maximum penalty."

Abusive parents are becoming "more of a problem, sadly; not less" across Toronto's 175 Catholic elementary schools, said John Pecsénye, head of the 4,000-member Toronto Elementary Catholic Teachers Association. Principals at two Toronto schools asked parents to shut down Internet chat rooms they had set up to hold daily instant-message bashing sessions about teachers they disliked.

"They were, in effect, cyber-bullying teachers behind their back," said a board official. Most educators insist the majority of parents work well with schools, and the percentage of calls from principals seeking advice on dealing with parents has gone down slightly this year, says Acton, of the Ontario Principal's Council.

Yet everyone has horror stories to share.

"We have parents spitting, swearing and pushing principals from one end of their office to another in an attempt to intimidate them," said veteran principal Helen Evans of the Toronto School Administrators' Association, which represents principals and vice-principals across the city.

"One mother marched into a hall and asked two girls to leave because she said 'By the time I'm finished with that a--hole teacher in there, you won't want to be around,'" Evans said.

When Emily Noble was a principal, a drunken father stomped into her office waving a

gun because he was angry his daughter had broken her arm on a school skating trip. When Noble, now president of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, asked him to leave he replied "If it happens again, I'll come back and shoot you." Noble had police issue a restraining order.

The *Star* spoke to a Toronto principal this week who has had to issue a "trespass letter" against a parent to keep her off school property because she has been so disruptive to her child's class. With files from David Grossman