

Northern teachers experience most violence in Canada

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Northern News Services

Published Monday, December 3, 2007

YELLOWKNIFE - Presidents of teachers' associations from all three territories met in Yellowknife Nov. 26, to discuss the alarming levels of violence their members are experiencing in Northern schools.

Attributing the high rate of violence to socio-economic circumstances and the influence of the media, the three associations are working to raise public awareness that classroom violence and harassment are increasing, and affecting their members' ability to do their jobs.

"We're trying to ensure the classroom is a safe place for students to learn," said Jimmy Jacquard, president of the Nunavut Teachers' Association.

A survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation in May 2005 found that Northern teachers experienced and witnessed the most violence and harassment in Canada.

To raise public awareness on violence in the classroom, Jacquard launched the "Make Learning Safe" campaign in February, distributing 800 posters and 9,000 bookmarks in schools all over Nunavut.

Last year alone, Jacquard received 66 reports of abuse in classrooms, with half of those assaults directed to the teacher.

As the campaign was launched, Jacquard said it became obvious that the public wasn't aware that violence in the classroom was such a serious issue.

"It was well received by the public, he said.

"Whether it makes a difference in the classrooms, that's yet to be seen."

To start measuring the success of these initiatives, the three presidents agreed that getting concrete statistics on incidents of violence is an important next step in dealing with the issue.

Jim Tredger, president of the Yukon Teachers Association, is one step ahead, with a survey he conducted this year on the safety of educators.

The results found that 77 per cent of teachers had been victims of abusive behaviour, 46 per cent were threatened with physical violence, and 39 per cent had been victims of personal violence. Among the findings, the survey revealed that teachers were victims of abuse from parents and students alike.



From left, Jim Tredger, president of the Yukon Teachers' Association, Amanda Mallon, president of the NWT Teachers' Association, and Jimmy Jacquard, president of the Nunavut Teachers' Association, were in Yellowknife Nov. 26 discussing the alarming rates of violence and harassment driving teachers away from the North. - Christine Grimard/NNSL photo

Two teachers in the NWT had to leave a community after escalating incidents of harassment earlier this year. Amanda Mallon, president of the NWT Teachers' Association, said community members were among the perpetrators.

Although many teachers coming from larger southern cities to teach in mainly aboriginal communities are white, Jacquard said the violence isn't race-based. He said Inuit teachers in Nunavut are just as susceptible to violence.

Jacquard said much of the violence can be traced to students' living conditions.

"There's a direct correlation between the health of the communities, and the level of violence," said Jacquard.

With sparse social housing in many communities, students are living in crowded houses with no personal space.

What was agreed upon at the meeting was the need for concrete data. The associations are following Tredger's lead in gathering statistics to help them lobby politicians to do something about unsafe classrooms.

The presidents are looking for more resources to have trained counsellors in all schools and to employ elders in the schools to pass along traditional values.

Mallon said improving conditions should help keep teachers in the North.

"Teachers are leaving because it's not safe, and that's not good for the students," said Mallon.

Jacquard said the high turnover of teachers puts students at a disadvantage, with each new teacher having to adapt to the community lifestyle and re-establish relationships with the students.