

North · CBC Investigates

## When Nunavut students are violent, suspending them isn't so simple

'Say, we suspend a kid. Is that going to make it worse?' asks one educator

[Nick Murray](#) · CBC News · Posted: Feb 26, 2021 3:00 AM CT | Last Updated: 1 minute ago



A playground in Pond Inlet. A CBC News investigation found the community's Ulaajuk School had the second-most reported incidents of student-on-student violence in the Qikiqtaaluk in 2019-2020, after Nuiyak School in Sanikiluaq. (Kieran Oudshoorn/CBC)

***This is Part 3 of a three-part series on violence in Nunavut's schools.***

- **CBC INVESTIGATES** [Nunavut schools had 1,000 violent incidents last year, CBC investigation reveals](#)
- **CBC INVESTIGATES** ['It's not their fault': Nunavut students who act violently let down by lack of counselling, educators say](#)

Earlier this year, a Nunavut father received a call that his son had been beaten up at school.

The aggressor — who was three grades older — had spit on the man's son. The younger boy retaliated by splashing a slush drink on the older boy, and got punched in the face for it.

While the two boys were separated in different offices, the aggressor left the office, sought out the younger boy, and began assaulting him anew, the father told CBC.

The older boy received a week's suspension — the maximum allowed without intervention by the local District Education Authority. Furious, the father appealed for a longer suspension.

"To spit at my son, itself, should have been a few days suspension," the father said, whom CBC News is not identifying in order to protect the identity of his child.

"And then the beating after that, it was just pretty upsetting."

Speaking to CBC News months after the incident, the father says in hindsight, the week-long suspension was the right call.

"I don't want to keep this kid away from learning and away from what he needs," he said.

"I know he had a troubled past, whether it was at home or something away from school. And I think [he brought] some of that hurt to school as well."

Therein lies the moral balance facing schools all across Nunavut: to levy enough punishment to keep staff and students safe when violence happens, but lenient enough not to step on a child's right to an education.

But educators who spoke with CBC News say a lack of consistency across the territory in how to deal with such incidents after the fact, are setting students up to repeat their actions.

## 'Like the wild, wild West'

A CBC News [investigation](#) into school violence in Nunavut found there were 491 suspensions reported in 2019-2020, totalling more than 1,400 missed days of school for students.

According to the territory's Education department, when a student is suspended, they receive support from their local District Education Authority (DEA), through learning packages to do while they're out of school, or through work with a local elder.

"It's not just, you stay out of school and that's it. The approach here is to improve behaviour," said Assistant Deputy Minister Sonia Osbourne.

But educators across Nunavut who spoke with CBC News say that's not happening.

"The system that we're working in right now, especially in terms of violence, is not necessarily working," said a northern Qikiqtaaluk educator who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of professional repercussions.

"Especially in the communities, it's not always but it can be like the wild, wild West."

The educator said her school sometimes shies away from suspending students because keeping them at school could be better for their well-being than sending them home.

"Say, we suspend a kid. Is that going to make it worse? Are they going home to an abusive situation?" she said.

"So it's safer to keep them at school. But then at what expense? At the expense of compromising the safety of others."

She also said in the absence of any formal policy on how violent situations are handled and how students are disciplined, the goalposts can move every time a school gets a new principal — a frequent occurrence in Nunavut's transient workforce.

"Kids are jerked one way in terms of rules and regulations, and then the other way. They're constantly in this state of trying to suss out what they can, what they can't do, and what their limits are," she said.

"It's finding some sort of, not necessarily a cut-and-paste unified approach to things, but like I know the DEAs created their Inuuqatigiitsiarniq policy, and that came out years and years ago. But if you asked our DEA two years ago what it was, they wouldn't have been able to find it."

In response to the educator's comments, Osbourne said the government "recognizes those concerns" and it's a work in progress.

"Our intention is to have a system that really supports the safety of our students and our teachers."

## **Bringing the student back into school**

Some educators also pointed to a lack of rehabilitation plans and policies to reintegrate students back into the schools after they're suspended.

"When you look at violent incidents that are happening in our schools as repeat offenders, there's a large amount of incidents that's happening from a small group of students because those students aren't receiving the supports that they need," Nunavut Teachers' Association president John Fanjoy said.

"If a student commits a violent incident, that student is just going to be out of school for a few days. There's going to be no contact on the part of the government in Nunavut, and that student is just going to be back in school.

"So basically you just separated that student from school for a few days. They're coming back, dealing with the same trauma, same issues."



Peter Pitseolak High School in Cape Dorset. The school reported 111 suspensions in 2019-2020, totalling 248 days — more than any other school in Nunavut. (Sara Frizzell/CBC)

One educator, who no longer works in Nunavut, said in the absence of any reintegration plans from the department of Education, her principal took it upon themselves to try and come up with their own plans.

"If a student hurt another student, before they came back in the class we tried to have it that they would sit and talk to each other, work it out," said the former educator, whom CBC News

agreed not to name because she still works in the profession and fears harming future job prospects by speaking out.

"I would say it helped. But then it wasn't consistent, and I think it was part of the problem."

Echoing Fanjoy, Nunavut's Representative for Children and Youth, Jane Bates, says not having consistency in talking to students about their actions is turning a blind eye to why students may be acting out.

"It's kind of like, yes, you have a violent incident. But then how are you addressing what's happening with that young person?" Bates said.

## **'We take this seriously'**

Nunavut's Education department initially declined a request for an interview about this CBC News investigation.

The department did not provide a reason, but later reversed its decision when CBC refused to accept written statements in lieu of an interview.

At the end of an hour-long interview with Osbourne, the assistant deputy minister of Education, she was asked who is accountable if her department doesn't deliver on promised changes to address violence in Nunavut's schools, and the issues underlying those violent incidents.

"That's a very good question," Osbourne replied.

"We take this seriously. This opportunity even to talk to you about this story just [has] pushed us. And certainly, this is part of my responsibility. And I'm committed to ensuring that what we say is what we do.

"We will continue to 'walk the talk' in a way that perhaps is not very clear. But one thing that's clear, we have a zero tolerance policy for violence in our schools and those reported incidents we take very seriously."

***If you have a story of school violence you'd like to share, email us at [nunavut@cbc.ca](mailto:nunavut@cbc.ca).***

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## Corrections

- In an earlier version of this story, we misattributed a quote to Nunavut's children and youth representative, Jane Bates, which said that many school principals were guilty of not having students' best interests in mind, or not caring about students. In fact, it was not Ms. Bates who said this. It was a CBC reporter who said it in a prologue to a question based on information obtained from other interviews. We sincerely apologize for the error.

*Feb 26, 2021 2:50 PM CT*

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