

Teachers having to fend for themselves

School violence on rise

EXCLUSIVE
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A leading WA education union has urged the McGowan Government to better protect public school employees, claiming attacks on staff should be treated the same as other public sector workers.

The Principals' Federation of WA says those who are responsible for educating children often find themselves either defusing violent confrontations or the victims of them, yet are not afforded the same protection under the law as police, nurses or prison officers.

President Bevan Ripp said principals, teachers and other staff were "a forgotten group of public sector employees" who worked in environments where there was no security or defence against intruders who were intent on confronting them in an abusive or violent manner.

He said in some cases, where a person had been charged over an assault on a public school employee, the penalty was minimal for the offender and the union wanted that to change.

Because teachers are not deemed "public officers" there are not strong deterrents for those who assault them.

Figures released in 2018 showed education staff in WA public schools had been assaulted or physically threatened more than 900 times in the first half of that year — 114 cases were referred to police, and 293 involved a weapon or object.

"Staff working in our schools also provide an outstanding service to the community and deserve the full protection of the law as they go about their duties," Mr Ripp said.

"Unfortunately, these professionals are not considered 'public officers' as are police, nurses and prison officers, and therefore are not afforded the same level of protection under the law — that is a mandatory jail term



The government's new campaign.

for any person found guilty of an assault against a 'public officer'.

"Parliament's rationale for not including these employees under the 'public officer' legislation is based on there being no compulsion to intervene in a violent incident, as is required of police. However, the reality is quite different, with school personnel often confronted face to face by an abusive or violent member of the public, and there is a need to respond in some way.

"If a school is in lock down, there is a responsibility on school leaders to monitor the situation until police arrive and this can result in direct confrontation which requires a response," Mr Ripp said. "In recent years we have seen examples where principals subject to physical assault have been subjected to legal processes that have resulted in minimal penalties for the offenders, and this needs to change."

The Federation's call comes as the State Government yesterday launched a campaign as part of its wider strategy to tackle violence within public schools.

The No Voice To Violence campaign features posters of assault victims and short videos explaining that by sharing footage of school fights students are condoning what happened.