

School focus on grades and test scores linked to violence against teachers

February 23 2024, by Emily Caldwell



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Violence against teachers is likely to be higher in schools that focus on grades and test scores than in schools that emphasize student learning, a new study has found.

Researchers surveyed over 9,000 U.S. teachers shortly before and during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic about their perception of the instructional emphasis in their schools. Participants also reported whether they had been subjected to physical, verbal, or property violence—by students, parents, colleagues, and/or administrators.

Results showed that a [school](#) culture focused on performance was associated with higher levels of all types of teacher-directed violence before and during COVID-19, while school emphasis on mastery of material was related to lower levels of violence aimed at educators.

"What was really striking was this performance culture predicted all kinds of increased violence by students, whether it be [physical violence](#), verbal threatening or property violence," said Eric Anderman, lead author of the study and professor of educational psychology at The Ohio State University.

"It wasn't the mastery part. It was when there's this focus on [grades](#) and [test scores](#)—'you've got to get good grades, school is all about grades'—that's when kids acted out against teachers."

Given the evidence that [nearly half of U.S. teachers are highly unsatisfied](#), the authors concluded that fostering a school culture of deep engagement in learning could make students happier and teachers safer.

The study was published in the [Journal of School Violence](#).

Anderman and colleagues surveyed a total of 9,363 teachers of pre-K to high school classes in suburban, urban, and rural districts across the United States over two time periods: between fall 2019 and March 2020 and during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Among the types of violence, teachers reported included objects being

thrown at them, obscene remarks or gestures directed their way, and damage to personal or classroom property. When assessing school culture, they rated such statements as "Teachers believe all students can learn," an indication of a climate focused on mastery, or "Teachers treat kids who get good grades better than other kids," signaling a climate focused on performance and grades.

Statistical analysis of the data controlled for numerous variables to look specifically for the link between school climate and violence directed at teachers.

In addition to those connections, the study showed that this violence didn't stop during and shortly after the COVID-19 lockdown. About 65% of surveyed teachers reported at least one incidence of verbal threats or property damage by students before the pandemic, compared to 32% and 26% of teachers reporting similar incidents, respectively, in 2020-21. Over half of teachers reported violence by parents before COVID-19, a figure that dropped to 29% early in the pandemic.

"The rates are lower, but the rates are still there," Anderman said.

"People say no one was in schools then. That's not true. A lot of times, teachers were in the building, but the students were at home. And some of the violence occurred over Zoom."

Student violence toward teachers was more common overall, but the study showed the same relationship trend between school culture and rates of teacher-directed violence by parents, colleagues, and administrators.

"If the school was really focused on grades, you had more instances of parents, colleagues, and administrators doing things that were harmful to teachers," Anderman said. "But if the school focused on mastery—if people in school said this is a place where we really encourage kids to

learn as much as they can to master material—you, for the most part, get less of the colleagues and parents and administrators engaging in any type of violence perpetrated against teachers."

Anderman described a mastery climate as one in which students who take longer than a peer to solve a math equation aren't considered worse students and where students who perform poorly on a test might be given a do-over to try to bring up their grade. With mastery, grades still matter—but encouraging kids to really learn is the larger goal.

On the other hand, pushing students to get good grades can lead to frustration, a major predictor of aggressive behavior, he said.

"This is something we can change that doesn't cost millions of dollars to change," Anderman said. "This is taking time to really think about when we're talking to kids, how much are we stressing the grades? This is about changing the way we talk to kids about what learning is about and what is really important."

More information: Eric M. Anderman et al, School Goal Structures and Violence Against Educators Before and During COVID-19, *Journal of School Violence* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/15388220.2024.2318703](https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2024.2318703)

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: School focus on grades and test scores linked to violence against teachers (2024, February 23) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-02-school-focus-grades-scores-linked.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.