

Safeguarding Our Workplaces

Work Shouldn't Hurt



A Union of Professionals

AFT PSRP

Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel



Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Copyright © American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO (AFT 2022). Permission is hereby granted to AFT state and local affiliates to reproduce and distribute copies of the work for nonprofit education purposes, provided that copies are distributed at or below cost, and that the author, source, and copyright notice are included on each copy. Any distribution of such materials to third parties who are outside of the AFT or its affiliates is prohibited without first receiving the express written permission of the AFT.

Table of Contents

Introduction	ii
STEP 1: Understanding the Problem	1
Framing Questions	2
Data Collection Tools	3
Example A:	
Workplace Hazard Assessment.....	4
Example B: Sample Letter	5
Example C:	
Sample Phone Script	6
STEP 2: Using the Data to Make Your Workplace Safer	9
STEP 3: We Have the Data and the Public Narrative on Our Side, but How Do We Leverage Solutions?	13
Negotiations.....	13
Contract Language.....	13
Training.....	13
Staffing	14
Protective Equipment	14
Health and Safety Committee.....	14
Legislation	14
Issues Organizing	15
Example D: House Bill 3318	16
Sample Timelines.....	18
Conclusion	20

Safeguarding Our Workplaces

Work Shouldn't Hurt



A Union of Professionals
AFT PSRP
Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel

Introduction

Too many paraprofessionals and school-related personnel (PSRPs) are getting hurt in the workplace. There are many reasons staff are getting hurt. Injuries range from work-related accidents to repetitive strain injuries. For the purposes of this toolkit, however, we are focusing on workplace injuries caused by other people.

In a typical year, school staff report experiencing everything from verbal insults to physical assaults. Trying to stop or limit these incidents can feel overwhelming, but we must start somewhere. Working with your union is one of the most impactful ways to make change in the workplace.

This toolkit is designed to help you and your union explore ways to keep our worksites safe for all school staff and students.

This toolkit is organized into three sections that provide a road map for tackling workplace injuries:

- 1. Understand the problem by collecting data.**
- 2. Use the data to raise awareness of the ways school support staff are being hurt.**
- 3. Leverage this data and these stories to achieve solutions on a local, state and national level.**

While there is no one single action that will solve this problem entirely, incremental improvements can be made so that working conditions get better over time. It will take a combination of compassionate thinking, collective action and legislative changes to achieve a safer working environment for school and college support staff. We, as unionists, have an obligation to help keep the workplace safe for all—students and staff.

Step 1

Understanding the Problem

A blurred photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a teacher in a blue shirt is leaning over a desk, interacting with a student. Other students are visible in the background, some sitting at desks. The image is overlaid with a large, semi-transparent blue circle in the upper left quadrant, which contains white text. There are also several smaller, overlapping circles in shades of blue and cyan scattered across the image.

**Everyone loses when
school support staff
don't have a safe
workplace.**

We know that staff assaults are happening, but until you fully understand the type of assaults, the severity and the frequency, it's difficult to determine how to best address them. To understand the scope of the problem, first develop a system for collecting and categorizing data on staff assaults.

Hopefully some form of incident reporting and data collection exists at your worksite already. However, while many employers have a procedure for collecting, compiling and maintaining injury records, we keep hearing reports from their worksites that procedures are not always followed. And worse, some employees note that they are encouraged not to report injuries because being bitten or scratched is **“just part of the job.”**

Having accurate data is important, and we should double down on reporting all incidents. Only when we know how bad the problem is will people be willing to make changes. Your union can request information from the employer on topics related to working conditions and workplace injuries. See Example B for a sample information request letter to an employer.

But in addition to insisting that our employers track and keep records of all injuries, we too should collect our own data telling the story of how school and college support staff are being injured on the job. There are several survey tools we can use to collect this information for ourselves.

By collecting the data ourselves, we gain the ability to collect information in the format that best serves our needs. **We can harness the power of our members' stories.** Finding out that six members were bitten at work is one thing, but having six members tell their stories in their own words is far more powerful when

convincing the employer to provide more worker protections.

We can also use data collection as an opportunity to have organizing conversations to **involve our members directly** in the work of securing a safer workplace.

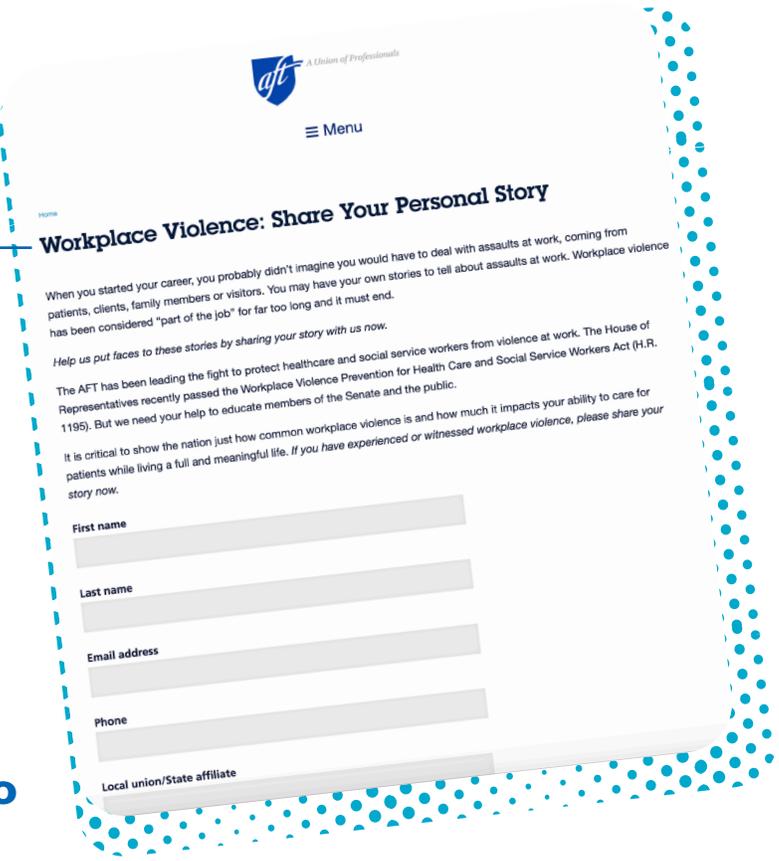
Collecting data helps give us a fuller picture. Documenting injuries and assaults can help us show patterns that aren't good for students or staff. Assaults can affect everyone, whether directly or indirectly, through:

- **Lost instructional time**
- **Increased medical costs**
- **Decreased productivity**
- **Increased absences**
- **Increased need for wraparound care** (e.g., psychological, stress and well-being)
- **Burnout and high staff turnover**

Everyone loses when school support staff don't have a safe workplace.

Most campaigns are born out of a desire to fix a problem. An issue campaign like a **Work Shouldn't Hurt** campaign begins by identifying an issue that is both widely held and deeply felt by the membership. As we begin collecting data for our campaign, we should frame our questions with an eye toward how we want to use that data throughout our campaign. Think about how you might use the data to tell a story, shape the narrative and move decision-makers to take action.

www.aft.org/workplace-violence-share-your-personal-story



In order to gather the most complete understanding, be sure to ask a range of questions.

Some questions should speak to the scope of harm experienced, some to the aftermath of what happened, and others to the supports or lack thereof given to members before and after they have experienced harm. As you frame questions in a survey tool, it's a good opportunity to ask members what they would like to see happen in an ideal world. How would things be different if they could wave a metaphorical magic wand? Below are sample questions that can help you get started:

- **How often in the past year have you experienced harm?**
 - Not at all
 - 1-3 times
 - 4-10 times
 - More than 10 times
- **What type of harm did you experience?**
 - Angry or threatening words
 - Pinched
 - Tripped
 - Bitten
 - Kicked
 - Other, please share: _____

- **Where did this experience happen?**
- **Did you report the incident?**
- **What was the response to the incident?**
- **Was there any follow-up?**
- **What kind of supports did you have before the harm?**
- **What kind of supports did you receive after the harm?**
- **Were you satisfied with the actions that took place after you reported the incident?**
- **What response would you have liked to see?**
- **What response would you have liked to see from your union?**

There are many different tools to collect data—and just as many ways to use them. Below are some examples you may want to consider.¹

Electronic or Physical Surveys

Surveys are the best way to quickly collect data. However, while this tool allows for data collection from a lot of people, it can feel impersonal if sent out electronically.

- **LeaderNet Surveys**
 - The AFT offers free survey creation and distribution tools for union leaders on LeaderNet. To learn more about the tools available to you, email the AFT's PSRP Department at psrp@aft.org.
- **SurveyMonkey**
- **Google Forms**
See Example A for a sample survey.

Information Requests

An information request allows the union to ask the district for data that already exist (see Example B for a sample letter). By learning what data have been collected, you can begin to understand the scope of the problem. Also, if the data provided to you doesn't match what members are saying, you are better able to articulate the discrepancies between what is being reported and your members' lived experiences.

One-on-One Conversations

One-on-one, person-to-person conversations are often the most effective way to engage your members. It allows your members to communicate their needs to you without the pressure of a group setting.

- **Home visits**
 - Meeting with your members in their homes for one-on-one conversations

about their experiences with workplace assaults is invaluable and often the best way to gather information while engaging your membership.

- Face-to-face conversations are the most effective form of communication, especially for a topic as sensitive as this one.

- **Phone calls**

- If speaking face to face is not possible, then reaching out by phone is a great way to survey your membership. See Example C for a sample phone script.

- **Roundtables/focus groups**

- Get a group of people together and ask them to wave a magic wand! How could their workplace be safer?
- Call together a group of individuals with the same job classification and ask them to come up with a list of protective equipment that would keep them safe. Ask them to weigh in on what trainings could help protect them and what staffing ratios are appropriate.

- **Social events**

- Need to decompress while sharing workplace woes? If so, put together an event that allows union leaders to collect anecdotal stories in a fun, non-workplace environment. Creating a casual environment to share potentially difficult stories can be cathartic.

- **Worksite meetings**

- This is an opportunity to have short conversations with colleagues or to do quick 15-minute meetings. Consult union leadership for advice on whether this can be conducted in the workplace.

¹ When collecting and using data from members, be sure not to disclose information that could violate student privacy rights.

Example A

Workplace Hazard Assessment

Untitled form

Questions Responses Settings

Workplace Danger Assessment

Place your description here

Full name:

Short answer text

School site:

Short answer text

On a scale from 1-10 (with 1 being the least safe), how safe do you feel at work?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Least safe Most safe

Do you have all the equipment you need to safely do your job?

YES

No

5. If you could change one thing at your workplace to make it safer, what would it be?

Long answer text

+ 📄 T 🖼️ ▶️ ☰

Example B

Please refer to your state's open records law and tailor your letter accordingly. Sample letters for many states can be found at www.nfoic.org/state-sample-foia-request-letters.

Dear Public School District,

Pursuant to the state open records law <insert state statute>, I write to request access to and a copy of any reports containing data concerning staff assaults, attacks, injuries, etc. Please include any archived articles, videos, documentaries or media that may concern the subject. If your agency does not maintain these public records, please let me know who does and include the proper custodian's name and address.

I agree to pay any reasonable copying and postage fees of not more than \$50. If the cost would be greater than this amount, please notify me. Please provide a receipt indicating the charges for each document.

As provided by <state name> Public Records Act, I request your response within 15 business days. See <insert state statute>.

If you choose to deny this request, please provide a written explanation for the denial, including a reference to the specific statutory exemption(s) upon which you rely. Also, please provide all segregable portions of otherwise exempt material.

I would note that willful violation of the open records law can result in the award of reasonable attorney fees and other costs of litigation. See <insert state statute>.

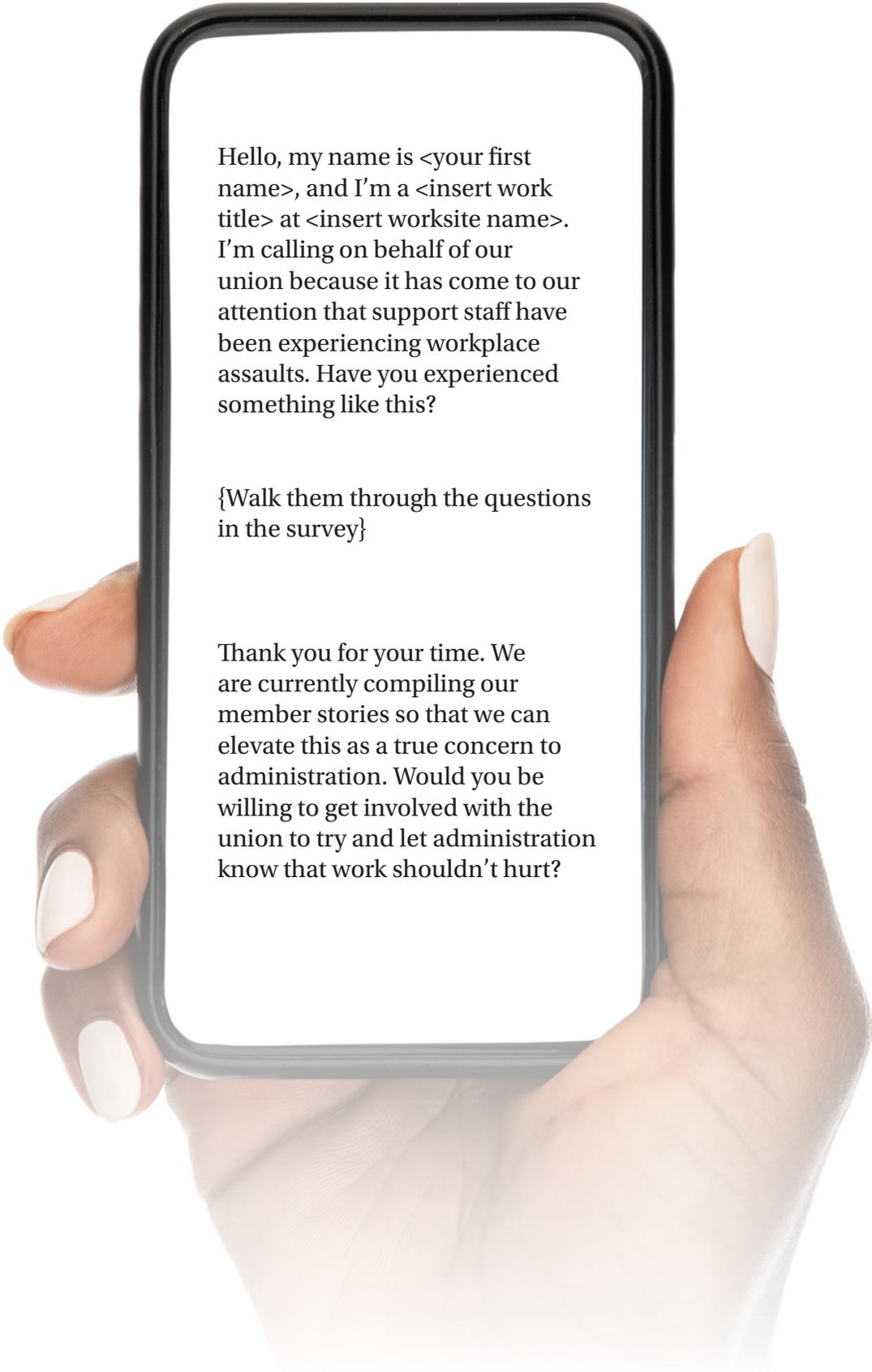
Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Ms. PSRP
1234 AFT Lane
Washington, DC 20001
202-555-5555

Example C

Sample Phone Script

A hand with light-colored nail polish holds a black smartphone. The screen of the phone displays a sample phone script. The script is centered on the screen and consists of three paragraphs of text. The first paragraph is an introduction, the second is a placeholder for survey questions, and the third is a closing statement.

Hello, my name is <your first name>, and I'm a <insert work title> at <insert worksite name>. I'm calling on behalf of our union because it has come to our attention that support staff have been experiencing workplace assaults. Have you experienced something like this?

{Walk them through the questions in the survey}

Thank you for your time. We are currently compiling our member stories so that we can elevate this as a true concern to administration. Would you be willing to get involved with the union to try and let administration know that work shouldn't hurt?

Step 2

Using the Data to Make
Your Workplace Safer

When the public sees support staff as people with real lives and stories they can relate to, it is more difficult for decision-makers to act with indifference.



Too often, the work support staff members do is underappreciated and undervalued. When you undervalue the work someone does, it often leads to that worker feeling undervalued and unappreciated. By raising the profile of the work and the people doing the work, we remind everyone that school support staff are critical to the success of our schools and colleges. Support staff are the backbone of their worksites, and in many instances, they are also the heart of those worksites.

Your outward-facing communications strategy should **raise the public profile of support staff** while simultaneously **drawing attention to the issue(s)** you are trying to address. The questions below can help guide your thinking as you develop your strategy:

- **Who is your audience?**
- **What do you want the audience to walk away thinking/believing/ knowing?**
- **Can you use your data to tell a compelling story about workplace violence?**
- **What is the best way to share the information you've collected?**
- **How do you plan to spread the message?**
- **What relationships can you leverage or build to help you control the narrative?**
- **How are community stakeholders and members integrated in your plan?**

When the public sees support staff as **people with real lives and stories they can relate to**, it is more difficult for decision-makers to act with indifference. It is not going to be easy for them to sweep assaults under the rug or ignore unsafe

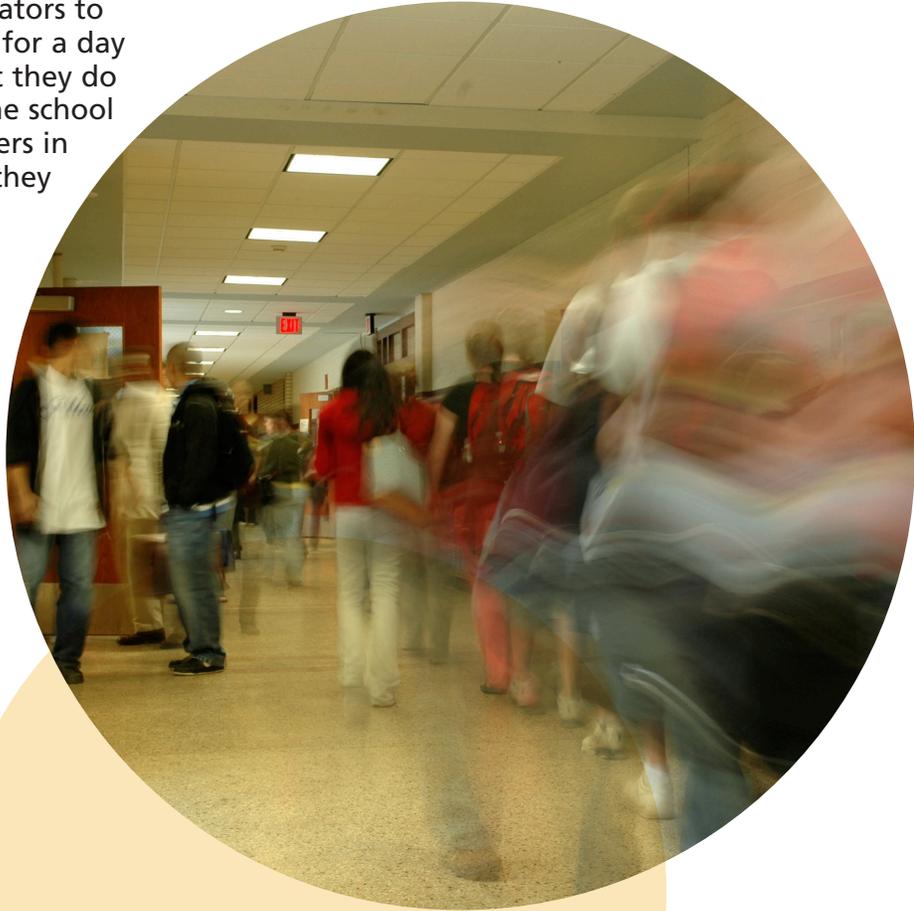
working conditions—which is exactly what we want! We want them to **act on** these concerns and **work with us** to make our workplaces safer for our students and staff.

Below are ways to include **outward-facing strategies**, helping to **elevate the work** of school and college support staff. Every outward-facing “communications” piece should **directly connect to your campaign**.

- **Honor a districtwide school support staff member of the month**
 - This celebration forces the employer to recognize essential members of its staff and celebrate the work they do. It's a smart tactic to remind employers monthly that school support staff are essential members of the community who deserve to be celebrated and not attacked.
- **Celebrate a different support staff member every week in April with a “Why Their Work Shouldn't Hurt” series of informational posters.**
 - The poster would highlight the work of support staff members and how they are needed to keep the worksite moving smoothly.
- **Collect community stories on the ways that PSRPs have changed their lives in a “Our Schools Should Be Safe for All” campaign**

- Hold **“Walk a Mile in My Shoes”** events

- Allow policymakers and administrators to take on the roles of support staff for a day in rotating fashion, learning what they do and how important they are to the school community. By placing these leaders in the roles of school support staff, they will gain a greater understanding of all the work that goes into supporting students and how we want all people in the school community to feel safe.



Step 3

We Have the Data and the Public Narrative on Our Side, but How Do We Leverage Solutions?



While not all locals have the right to bargain collectively, all locals have the ability to communicate with their administration, to discuss issues and to propose changes that help keep members safe.

All our work is in vain if we can't harness our data and stories and turn them into actionable solutions.

We need to leverage our **collective union power** to make our workplaces safer. We can accomplish this through many things, including **collective bargaining, relevant training, appropriate staffing, increased protective equipment, the creation of health and safety committees, legislation and collective action.** Below are several concrete examples of how you can leverage your collective power to make worksites safer.

Negotiations

While not all locals have the right to bargain collectively, all locals have the ability to communicate with their administration, to discuss issues and to propose changes that help keep members safe. Whatever the process, your long-term success will be determined by your ability to rally public support and engage members in collective actions that support the goal of making workplaces safer for students and staff.

● Formal negotiation

- Talks with management that lead to a legally enforceable collective bargaining agreement signed by both parties and voted on by your members.

● Meet and confer

- This can be defined differently depending on your state.
- Both sides meet and discuss workplace issues and arrive at agreements through the creation of policy. The union and employer do not “negotiate” or sign a contract, but the policy you arrive at through meet and confer may still be enforceable through a grievance and third-party arbitration process if that is codified in district policy.

● Memorandum of understanding

- A legal document describing a bilateral agreement between parties. It expresses a convergence of will between the parties, indicating an intended common line of action, rather than a legal commitment. However, an MOU can be made legally enforceable by including a clause indicating that it is the intent of both parties for it to be legally binding.

Contract Language

One of the benefits of being a member of a national union like the American Federation of Teachers is access to the entire collective body of knowledge that every affiliate local has amassed over the years.

● AFT contracts database

- This is a database that has many affiliate contracts. You can search this database for contract language on health and safety issues—from staffing ratios to paid professional development to protective equipment, or just about anything else that you may want to include in a contract.
- The PSRP Department can share contract language designed to help locals address workplace safety. Your local president can request access by emailing us at psrp@aft.org.

Training

Training provides staff an opportunity to learn techniques that can help them avoid an incident, protect themselves during an incident and heal from trauma after an incident. By giving staff the tools beforehand, they are better able to confront many of the situations that they face at the workplace.

- **De-escalation training**

- Courses that teach people in tense situations to create space while being empathetic and communicating in a way that defuses potentially dangerous or life-threatening situations.

- **Self-defense courses**

- Courses that train people in techniques that keep them safe in a scenario where they are being attacked.

- **Restorative justice**

- A model of discipline that relies on open, honest communication and community accountability to maintain community standards of behavior.

Staffing

An important part of managing workloads and keeping everyone safe is making sure that there are enough staff available to do the job safely and effectively.

- Appropriate staffing ratios can be established in contracts or MOUs.
- Staffing ratios can help ensure that an untrained substitute is never in a classroom alone or without appropriate supports.

Appropriate trainings make a difference

“Through a meet and confer, our union was able to secure de-escalation training for security guards. I originally came from a corrections background, where so many physical encounters happened. Because of my de-escalation training, I know techniques to put the student first and use trauma-informed care to keep things calm.”

—**Officer Smith**



Protective Equipment

When working with certain student populations, it is not unheard of to get bitten, scratched or hit. While we will continue to do what is best for our students, we can also proactively protect ourselves. Listed below are some examples of protective equipment that the union might negotiate with the employer to provide to support staff:

“Thankful that my union was able to negotiate breakaway lanyards for us. Before they were replaced, they could very easily be used to choke us.”
—**Tasha T.**

- **Kneepads**
- **Breakaway lanyards**
- **Shin guards**
- **Nonslip shoes**
- **Bite guards**
- **Calm rooms**
- **Safety glasses**



Health and Safety Committees

Health and safety committees are a great way to meet with management and come to an agreement about workplace safety concerns that are causing harm. Creating health and safety committees is an effective way to address workplace assaults both before they occur through safety policy and after an incident through investigation and policy review and revision.

Legislation

The creation of state legislation to help fund and/or support districts across the state can be a valuable tool that can be used in many ways.

- **Individualized Education Plan**

- Often, school support staff are expected to carry out an IEP without knowing the content of the IEP and without being able

to provide input into the development of the supports they are charged with providing. By negotiating and enforcing a school support staff's role in the IEP process, school support staff will have more control over their work and the environment. Workers in Oregon were able to win language that gave them access to behavior plans and the power to be a part of the creation process (see Example D).

Issue Organizing

Issue organizing uses the power of your members' collective action to solve a problem or achieve a goal. After you figure out what issue is widely held and deeply felt by your members, you can engage them in a series of escalating actions designed to move decision-makers. This can range from as simple as a coordinated sticker day to as serious as a work stoppage.

"In Oregon, our union organized and worked with the state to get better language for us all. Now we have seats at the table to help decide how to best keep us all safe when it comes to educating a child."

—**OSEA Member**

Example D

Work Shouldn't Hurt Legislation from Oregon

Enrolled

House Bill 3318

Sponsored by Representative DOHERTY, Senator GELSER; Representatives GORSEK, HACK, MCLAIN, POST, SMITH G, SOLLMAN, Senators DEMBROW, FREDERICK, KNOPP, MANNING JR, ROBLAN

CHAPTER

AN ACT

Relating to special education procedures related to behavior; and prescribing an effective date.

Be It Enacted by the People of the State of Oregon:

SECTION 1. Section 2 of this 2017 Act is added to and made a part of ORS chapter 343.

SECTION 2. (1) As used in this section:

(a) "Behavior intervention plan" means an individualized plan, including positive interventions, designed to:

(A) Assist a student to decrease inappropriate behavior; and

(B) Increase or teach an alternative appropriate behavior.

(b) "504 Plan" means an education plan developed for a student in accordance with section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1978, 29 U.S.C. 794.

(c) "Functional behavioral assessment" means an individualized assessment of a student that results in a hypothesis about the function of a student's behavior and, as appropriate, recommendations for a behavior intervention plan.

(d) "Serious bodily injury" has the meaning given that term in ORS 339.285.

(e) "Service provider" includes school personnel who:

(A) Are or will be providing services related to the implementation of an individualized education program or a 504 Plan to the student; and

(B) Do not hold a teaching license or an administrative license.

(2) A school district must conduct a functional behavioral assessment and develop, review or revise a behavior intervention plan within 45 school days of receiving parental consent to conduct the assessment for every student who has:

(a) An individualized education program or a 504 Plan; and

(b) Placed the student, other students or staff at imminent risk of serious bodily injury as

a result of the student's behavior.

(3) When a behavior intervention plan is developed, reviewed or revised as provided by subsection (2) of this section, the school district must:

(a) Ensure that the behavior intervention plan is based on a functional behavioral assessment that was conducted by a qualified person;

(b) Ensure that the behavior intervention plan appropriately addresses the student's needs;

(c) Allow service providers involved in the incident when the student, other students or staff were at imminent risk of serious bodily injury to provide meaningful input into the development, review or revision;

(d) Inform the service providers about any portions of the behavior intervention plan that are relevant to the service providers and about any training opportunities for the service providers; and

(e) Ensure that the behavior intervention plan was correctly implemented before making any revisions.

SECTION 3. Section 2 of this 2017 Act first applies to the 2018-2019 school year.

SECTION 4. This 2017 Act takes effect July 1, 2018.

SAMPLE TIMELINE 1



DAY 1:

The incident occurs and is reported to the union and management.

10 DAYS LATER:

Management does nothing; a similar incident occurs again.

14 DAYS LATER:

A general membership meeting is held where members ask for their union's help.

21 DAYS LATER:

The local develops and launches a survey.

30 DAYS LATER:

The union surveys members through a combination of worksite, phone and home interviews.

40 DAYS LATER:

The union completes the surveys and compiles raw data into a compelling narrative.

44 DAYS LATER:

The union presents the data to the membership and holds action breakouts to hear member strategies and collect member pictures and quotes to help craft the message on the urgent need for action.

55 DAYS LATER:

The union starts media training for members who have experienced assaults. Stewards/building reps hold meetings with members in their schools to spread the message that this campaign is about "**Respect, Dignity and Safety.**"

60 DAYS LATER:

A communication piece is completed and hung prominently at each school to promote the union's **Walk a Mile in My Shoes** campaign.

74 DAYS LATER:

The **Walk a Mile in My Shoes** event occurs, with media members and school and community stakeholders in attendance.

75 DAYS LATER:

Members hold meetings with key district administrators, policymakers and community allies, sharing their stories of being hurt in the workplace.

80 DAYS LATER:

The district announces the creation of a labor-management health and safety committee.

110 DAYS LATER:

The union issues a demand to bargain over training and protective equipment.

200 DAYS LATER:

The union and district jointly announce an agreement on new language, training and providing new equipment for staff in high-risk occupations.

SAMPLE TIMELINE 2

Winning does not always mean you get everything you ask for. A win may be the creation of a health and safety committee.

DAY 1:

The incident occurs.

1 MONTH LATER:

The union collects qualitative and quantitative data on workplace violence.

2-4 MONTHS LATER:

The union holds planning sessions and media training.

5 MONTHS LATER:

A communications piece announces a **Walk a Mile in My Shoes** event.

6 MONTHS LATER:

The **Walk a Mile in My Shoes** event occurs, with media members and community and school stakeholders in attendance.

7 MONTHS LATER:

The union forms a health and safety committee to meet with administration concerning workplace assaults.

8 MONTHS LATER:

The administration and union announce a temporary district-level guideline and form a taskforce to tackle problems in the state legislature.



Conclusion

Support staff assaults affect the entire school, directly and indirectly, and it is in everyone's interest to work together to alleviate this problem.

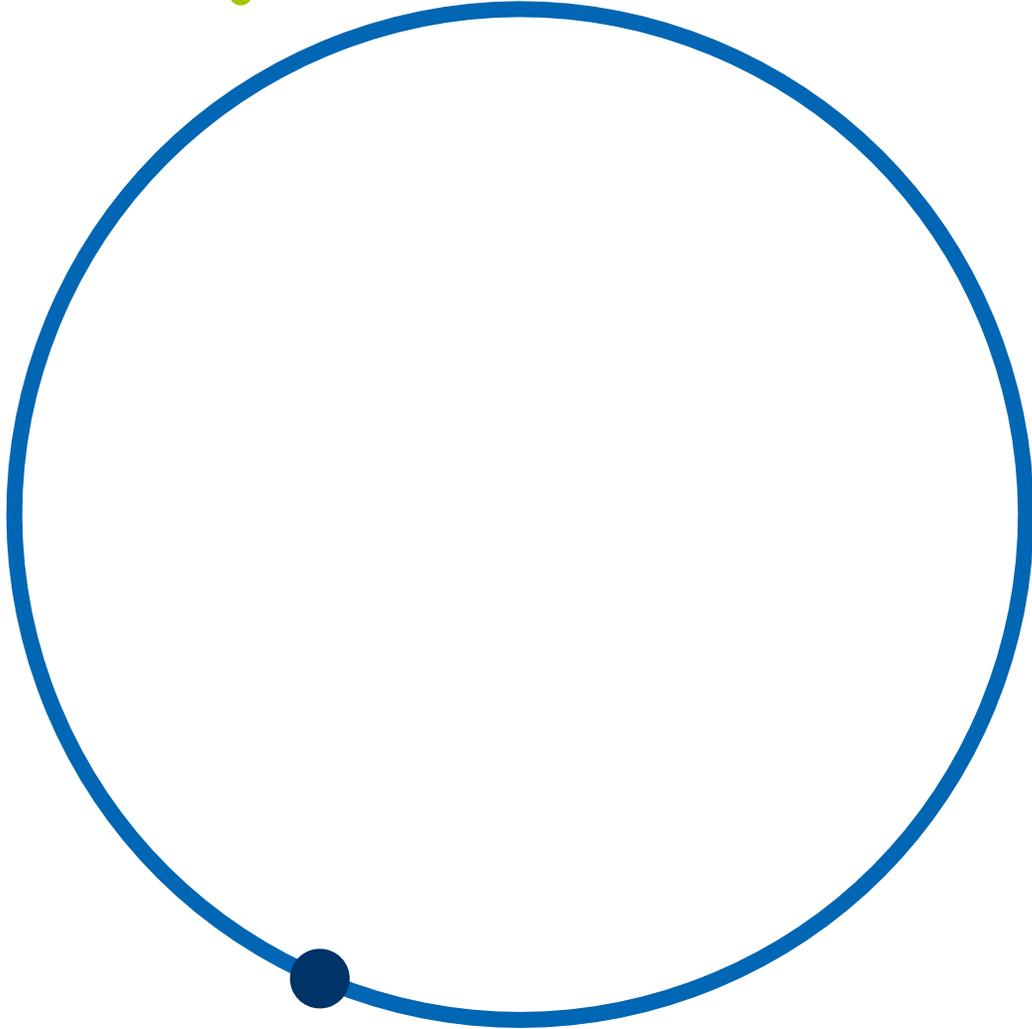
And while there is no silver bullet or only one way to win safeguards in the workplace, there are still concrete steps you can take to help your local be successful in securing additional supports. Just remember, all strong issue campaigns have at least three important steps in common:

- 1. Understanding the problem by collecting data.**
- 2. Using that data and that information to show how workplace assaults are not good for students or staff.**

- 3. Leveraging your members' personal stories—their narratives—to come up with actionable and appropriate solutions. Solutions can be found with individual schools, districts or even legislative bodies.**

This toolkit is only a sampling of what your combined union power can accomplish. Creative thinking and collective action through your union are the keys to overcoming obstacles. And your national union wants to help you however we can. If we can provide any support, we encourage you to reach out to the PSRP Department at psrp@aft.org.

Work shouldn't hurt!



A Union of Professionals

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202-879-4400



aft.org



AFTunion



@AFTunion



AFTunion



4/2022