

# The Australian Capital Territory Occupational Violence and Complex Case Management Team

A case study  
for the national  
strategy to address  
the abuse of  
teachers, school  
leaders and other  
school staff.

The ACT Education Directorate (the Directorate) delivers high quality education across 89 public schools which educate over 49,000 students from early childhood through to secondary schooling, and holds the wellbeing, health, and safety of both students and its workforce at the core of its school improvement and education agenda.

The ACT Education Directorate's Occupational Violence and Complex Case Management Team (OVCCM) was established with the core purpose of improving student outcomes through the provision of targeted support to respond to complex behaviours impacting the safety of staff and students. This work recognises that schools and school systems have a duty to protect the safety of school staff and others in the workplace, through appropriate riskmanagement and support.

The OVCCM Team is comprised of both work health and safety experts and allied health professionals. The contributions of the Allied Health professionals enable a focus on understanding the challenging behaviours seen in schools and facilitates the provision of targeted procedures and support to protect staff wellbeing, with a human centred approach.

## Developing the OV and Complex Case Management Team

The OVCCM Team was specifically developed following a challenging period of time in the Australian Capital Territory. An Enforceable Undertaking was issued by Worksafe ACT related to the instances of Occupational Violence in ACT Public Schools. The Directorate recognised a new approach to address occupational violence in schools was required. Previously, responses to occupational violence in schools considered staff and student impacts but these would be considered by different teams (one from a student support and therapeutic intervention perspective, the other through a more work health and safety lens). This meant that interventions required by staff or students were not always complimentary in achieving holistic outcomes.

In August 2016, the Directorate and Australian Education Union ACT formed a joint working group whose focus was to identify and mitigate risks associated with occupational violence in public schools in the ACT, and work to ensure the ongoing health and safety of school staff.



### Occupational Violence

#### Defining occupational violence

Occupational violence, defined as 'any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, or injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work'<sup>1</sup> is a complex issue with implications for the learning environment and the wider school community.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.education.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/1087488/Occupational-Violence-Management-Plan.pdf](https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1087488/Occupational-Violence-Management-Plan.pdf)

## Unpacking the OV and Complex Case Matters Team

### How the OVCCM Team works:

- The Directorate focus on utilising a whole of Government incident reporting mechanisms called 'Riskman' this provides details of any workplace injuries to staff.
- A Riskman report is received by the team. This report provides details regarding the incident and impact to the staff member.
- The report is 'triaged' upon submission and staff assess the contents of the report and use a risk assessment matrix to rate the severity of the incident and the impact on the staff member on a scale of low, medium, high or extreme.
- The frequency of the staff members involvement in prior reported incidents is considered in the risk rating.
- Follow up actions are identified based on the allocated risk matrix rating. If low level, the incident may be deemed appropriate for the school to manage independently.
- If medium or high level, an Occupational Violence Risk Assessment (OVRA) may be conducted to establish next steps, and staff may be referred to the specialist wellbeing team.
- The OVRA is considered holistically addressing the risks associated with the student, and

the controls staff can put in place. This assessment is consulted with staff who are required to apply controls to ensure they are comfortable in application.

- The OVCCM Team provide ongoing support, advice and access to relevant resources to ensure both staff safety and wellbeing until capacity has been built and level of support reduced. Where required the team will also put in place a positive behaviour Support plan that will detail the approach to the student, including where and when restricted practice is deemed reasonable.
- The OVCCM team have a clear understanding of risks of OV across the system and ensure that appropriate supports are put in place for students.

**Key considerations:**

- The OVCCM risk matrix is based on the whole of government risk assessment approach which considers physical injury, psychological injury, and reputational risk, among many other factors.
- If a staff member is consistently involved in low level risks, their risk rating will be increased. Frequency of incidents is considered as critical information.
- Triage staff are extensively trained and lead by a specialist who cross checks risk assessments to ensure consistency.

The utilisation of the risk management system has enabled the OVCCM Team to ensure each incident is appropriately and thoroughly logged/ recorded and triaged, and responded to. For this to be successful, it has been essential for the team to establish a positive reporting culture in which conversations about experiences of occupational violence and challenges to staff wellbeing can occur.

## Creating a positive reporting culture

The reluctance of school staff to report challenging student behaviour has a significant flow on effect. Prior to the development of the OVCCM Team, and related work in other areas of the Directorate, it was difficult to fully conceptualise the extent of occupational violence in schools, undermining the capacity to provide targeted and appropriate support. For many school staff, the wellbeing of the student was always the primary consideration, and school staff were stepping into a potentially dangerous space out of concern for student wellbeing. The approach adopted by the OVCCM Team works to enable the equal prioritisation of both staff and student wellbeing and safety.

The OVCCM Team have worked to establish a positive reporting culture to ensure occupational violence is recorded and responded to in a manner that supports both staff and students. Consequently, school staff have developed increased trust in the case management process, and confidence in the benefits of seeking support.

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It's not just about staff and not just about students. It has to be us together. We need to work to establish that everyone has an equal right to be safe.

Stakeholder

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## Positive reporting culture in schools

Key attributes of a positive reporting culture in schools include:

- school staff feeling empowered and confident to speak up without fear of reprisal,
- trust in an appropriate response and reaction from those in a position of authority, and
- clear guidelines and established awareness of what behaviours should be reported in the first instance.

To facilitate the establishment of a culture of positive reporting, it is essential for schools to see the purpose of the reporting itself, and build trust in consistently receiving an appropriate response that leads to the minimisation of risk.

The OVCCM Team is committed to ensuring that there is clear communication around responsibilities and expectations at all stages of incident management, from schools reporting responsibilities, the OVCCM Team's response, through to the final outcome. This has enabled the Directorate to provide specific guidance and support to responding to each independent issue, whether at a school level, allied health support level, through the Directorate's Network Student Engagement Team (NSET), or through escalation to the OVCCM Team.

## Key learnings – data and reporting

The use of data has been essential to the success of the OVCCM Team. Improved reporting, and use of the RiskMan risk management system, has allowed the OVCCM Team to adapt how incidents of occupational violence are conceptualised and responded to with a focus on continual improvement.

Upon establishment of the OVCCM Team, a review of the use of data related to occupational violence in schools was undertaken, with staff required to report even low-level incidents of occupational violence to ensure a comprehensive picture of events. As more data has become available, and through implementation of a full OV risk assessment approach, it has become possible to provide earlier proactive support to reduce the risk of higher-level incidents, and work to determine the most appropriate response.

For schools with low levels of reporting, emphasis has been placed on providing targeted training to ensure school staff understand the importance of reporting, and the support they can expect to receive in response. Adopting a therapeutic lens and working with schools to implement processes around reporting and appropriate engagement with the OVCCM Team has enabled a more consistent approach to providing access to appropriate supports and minimising occupational violence in schools.

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Data has allowed us to finally understand what occupational violence is in a school setting.

Stakeholder

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## Impact and future developments

In the future it is likely that there will be increasing reports of incidents of occupational violence, as reporting processes are more broadly adhered to, and a greater awareness is established of the support and expertise available. In acknowledgement of the long-term nature of this initiative, the OVCCM Team are continually working to reflect upon and improve their practice. Areas of improvement include recent changes to incident triaging and improved awareness of the ongoing impact of reporting on school staff.

The OVCCM Team also look forward to further exploring the connection between occupational violence and the use of restrictive practices. This work will involve seeking to understand the function of challenging behaviours that may lead to reportable incidents, and how these behaviours can be changed through frameworks such as Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) to reduce occupational violence.

By supporting schools to understand the neurological foundation of challenging behaviour, and consequently viewing the behaviour differently, teachers will be more empowered to respond from a place of understanding rather than reacting from a place of uncertainty. This work will also consider how functional behavioural aspects relate to occupational violence, as well as what might be needed to build the capacity of pre-service and early career teachers to ensure they are fully prepared and supported at the beginning of their teacher careers.

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Schools reported being felt heard and supported by the ACT as a directorate – and were finally hearing the message that ‘it’s not okay to be hurt at school.

Stakeholder

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