

Lockdown or lockup?

Some students say they felt like prisoners

By **BRETT CLARKSON**, SUN MEDIA

Last Updated: 17th November 2008, 3:23am

Nduta Nheta's first lockdown was caused by a drunken man banging on the windows of her elementary school.

Her second one came this fall after a friend in her Grade 9 class was stabbed in the stomach, apparently over a cheap pair of gloves.

Minutes after that Oct. 28 knifing, the Don Mills Collegiate Institute student found herself confined to a Grade 9 classroom full of other restless, anxious teens.

They would spend the next four hours there. The kids were barred from leaving the room, going to the bathroom, or using their cellphones.

"The classroom is really small, it's not like P. Diddy's house," said Nheta, 14, referring to the hip-hop mogul. "It's pretty small. So we were getting bored, scared, and anxious. A lot of people didn't know where (the attacker) went after (the victim) got stabbed. Some people thought he was still around."

Tensions flared as some of the cooped-up kids began to grow angry, she said.

"Yeah, people got upset about it," Nheta said. "The teacher told a student, 'It's okay, calm down', and he was like, 'You want me to smile? My friend just got stabbed, I'm not going to have a fake smile for you'."

When the lockdown was finally lifted at around 2:30 p.m. -- 3 1/2 hours after a suspect had been arrested -- Nheta went to her locker to retrieve her cell phone. She'd missed over a dozen calls from her parents.

"Yeah, they worried; they were calling my phone. I had like 15 missed calls," Nheta said. "They said, 'Next time just take your phone. Don't listen to the teacher'."

The lockdown at Don Mills C.I. was just one of 38 lockdowns imposed on Toronto's public schools so far this school-year. Last year, there were 101 lockdowns in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). In 2006-07, there were 47, while in 2005-06, there were 108.

And just as lockdowns are becoming all too common in Toronto schools, critics are beginning to question their effectiveness and argue they are likely having a negative impact on the students, particularly younger children.

"They're undermining the goal of schools to create a positive learning environment," said Dr. David Day, an associate professor at Ryerson University's Department of Psychology.

NO RESEARCH

Day, who co-authored a 1995 report on school-based violence prevention policies in Canada, said there has been little to no academic research on lockdowns -- which can be called by police or principals-- and their effect on elementary and high school students.

"I think it's a big problem that we don't know what impact lockdowns are having on kids," Day said.

He cautioned against allowing lockdowns to become a habitual knee-jerk reaction to any and all threats, perceived and real. Day warned against fostering a prison-like atmosphere in the schools and said schools shouldn't even be employing prison and police jargon like "lockdown" in the first place.

"I would suggest that lockdowns are undermining a school's positive learning environment and creating a mistrustful, angry, resentful population of youth who are resentful and mistrustful of their teachers, the administrators in charge, (some of whom) are probably doing lockdowns without giving real thought as to what they're doing and why, and what the impact is on young people," Day said.

'SECURES KIDS'

Stu Auty, president of the Canadian Safe School Network, favours lockdowns because of their practical purpose -- to reduce the number of children who could end up in harm's way if a dangerous person is stalking the school's hallways.

"What a lockdown does is it secures kids," Auty said. It puts them in a situation where there's going to be the fewest targets in a school.

That's ultimately what a lockdown is -- to reduce targets."

Donna Quan, who oversees security at the TDSB's 558 schools, said the 38 schools that have been locked down already this year represents a higher-than-average total. But, she contended the number is higher because of extra caution being undertaken by principals and the Toronto Police. Both have the power to impose the lockdowns.

"We did get off to what appears to be a higher number of emergency response scenarios, lockdown scenarios, but I think in some cases it's the extra caution that police are taking and the principals are taking," Quan said. "In this day and age, that extra caution is needed."

Quan insisted that lockdowns aren't creating a culture of fear in schools. She said that training students how to respond to split-second emergency crises is a realistic skill that might someday apply in their lives outside school.

"It's a culture of security and a culture of confidence in how to respond to risk situations," Quan said. "We need to teach students and model for them what resiliency looks like and sounds like in real life."

As for Nheta, while she wants students to be able to call or text their parents in lockdown situations, she thinks the lockdown at Don Mills C.I. was warranted.

"If you just ran home, and you didn't know who the stabber was, and you just accidentally met up with him, you could've been stabbed," she said.

Copyright © 2008 Toronto Sun All Rights Reserved