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Response to school safety report lukewarm**TDSB outlines changes, including increased police presence, but critics say plan lacks specifics****TIMOTHY APPLEBY**
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Long on good intentions, short on specifics.

The lawyer who headed a hard-hitting examination of safety in Toronto schools that reported earlier this year proffered distinctly lukewarm praise for the response from the Toronto District School Board, issued yesterday.

What's not needed, Julian Falconer said, is "more meetings."

A stepped-up police role in some form, an expanded tips line to encompass the Internet and revised strategies for handling bullying and sexual assault are among the few concrete proposals in the TDSB report, issued one year after 15-year-old Jordan Manners was shot dead in a hallway at North York's C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute.

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Much else, however, is vague.

The school board's plan arrived four months after Mr. Falconer and a panel delivered a bleak assessment of safety and the surrounding culture of fear in some Toronto public schools.

Looking ahead, the TDSB hopes to hire dozens of social workers, counsellors and other experts to work with at-risk youth and their families. There also would be more mentors in place, along with other initiatives.

But where would the money come from?

"There remains a cultural chasm between what's needed and what's available," Mr. Falconer said. "Here's a failure on the part of the provincial government to recognize that this ... is about the delivery of social services."

The TDSB findings do acknowledge the thrust of the Falconer report, its author said.

"But in failing to take immediate steps, there are areas where they have chosen not to follow the panel's recommendations."

The TDSB outlines six areas where changes need to take place: safety, equity, gender-based violence, community partnerships, support for marginalized youth and the code of silence that often thwarts police investigations.

No quick-fire panaceas are offered in the report, which will be scrutinized by board trustees today and can be read online at <http://www.tdsb.on.ca>.

"This report is about incremental change," said TDSB chairman John Campbell, adding that none of the initiatives immediately planned will require additional funds for the perennially cash-strapped board.

But its larger goals clearly will need extra money, a budget shortfall that is not addressed.

Sitting quietly in the packed auditorium, Jordan Manners's mother, Loreen Small, was unimpressed.

"It's just a bunch of talk to keep me quiet," she said afterward. "Show me where it says that a child who goes to the school that my son went to is a little bit safer than he or she was a day ago."

"There's this huge gap," said Canadian Safe School Network president Stu Auty, noting that safety is now the pre-eminent concern among parents of school-age children

"Moneys have been going to literacy forever, but this has all of a sudden risen to the top of the pile, without the funding behind it. This issue is not going to go away."

Mr. Falconer's 1,000-page report comprised 126 recommendations and was commissioned amid widening concern about violence in city schools. Jordan's death - one year ago this week - was the first homicide in a school building Toronto has ever seen.

The Falconer report alluded to what was described as "a culture of silence" within the board about violence in schools. (At C.W. Jefferys, among other things, Mr. Falconer uncovered an incident in which police were not notified of an alleged sexual assault involving a 14-year-old girl and six male teens who have since been charged.)

The most substantive proposal in the TDSB report calls for an enhanced police role, without spelling out what it would be.

"We are in discussions with the police to figure out the best way we can engage the police," board education director Gerry Connelly said.

"There will be 30 additional police assigned to our public and Catholic schools to work with them."

That's not expected to mean more cops patrolling school corridors.

Most likely it will entail expanding the Empowered Student Partnerships program, which promotes relationship-building among police, students and teachers through school visits.

If so, Mr. Auty approves, as does Constable Scott Mills, Crime Stoppers officer for Toronto schools.

"There's not a lot of meat on it," Constable Mills said of the TDSB report. "I've read it all through, and I can't see a lot of hands-on stuff."

"But if we can increase our manpower in the student partnership program - that's what needs to be done. We're already in the schools every day, so I hope we're going to get a mandate to do a lot more."

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