



School hall monitors keep the peace

February 17, 2008

LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

One morning in Toronto's biggest high school, during the three-minute crush between periods, hall monitor Dave Bradley spots a girl waving something metal in the air.

He melts into the crowd and resurfaces at her side. The two speak briefly, then laugh, and he dissolves back into the mob.

"Just needle-nosed pliers for tuning her guitar," says Bradley, one of two hall monitors at Willowdale's Earl Haig Secondary School, where an arts program has its share of guitar players.

Back at the intersection of corridors he calls "grand central station," Bradley keeps scanning the crowd, listening, double-checking that those guys over there are just play-fighting, watching that clutch of kids he suspects are heading out to smoke weed in the park, monitoring the intensity of a lovers' spat by the door, reminding Grade 9s not to litter.

"I read faces – who's mad, who's sad today, what's the mood, is there any tension?" says 42-year-old Bradley, one of 157 adults working as hall monitors across Canada's largest school board.

Part bouncer, part buddy, hall monitors are a sort of thin blue line in Toronto's schools between calm and chaos. Providing a watchful eye, an ear to the ground and a bridge between kids and authorities, they're being hailed more and more as a key to school safety.

They are unarmed, wear no uniform, have little training and earn all of \$30,000 a year.

Yet lawyer Julian Falconer last month called for more hall monitors in Toronto high schools in his landmark report on school safety following the shooting death in May of Jordan Manners at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate.



TANNIS TOOHEY/TORONTO STAR
Hall monitor Dave Bradley gives a student the high-five during his rounds at Earl Haig Secondary School. Julian Falconer called for more monitors in his report on school safety last month.

Falconer also called for more teachers doing hall duty alongside monitors to round up what he dubbed "hallway wanderers" – kids who skip class but sometimes hang around, causing trouble that can sometimes lead to violence. In his 1,000-page report, Falconer noted that hallway wanderers were a big problem at Jefferys. One of the first steps the Toronto board took after Jordan Manners was shot was to post two extra hall monitors at the school.

You don't find monitors in many places in Ontario; most school boards get teachers to keep an eye out on the halls. The Halton Catholic board hires "commissionaires" (security guards).

Toronto's school board is one of few where there is a tradition of handing hallway safety to grown-ups whose sole job is to walk the halls making sure trouble's not brewing and the metal in a kid's hand is just pliers.

On a typical day, Earl Haig monitors will wield bolt-cutters on at least one faulty locker padlock, pass through the library watching for kids on Facebook, and check the cafeteria for students playing poker for money – not allowed. Recently they fetched a plumber with a special gizmo to retrieve a gold heirloom ring one girl dropped inside her locker door. They also summoned a caretaker with special solvent to remove red paint from the hand of a boy who'd been touching washroom graffiti.

And, as will happen in a building with 2,100 hormonal teens, they sometimes witness emotional breakdowns.

Last year Bradley spotted a girl drifting down a stairwell, panic in her eyes, and made up more dramatically than usual. He approached and asked how she was. She fell apart. He called the school social worker, and within an hour she was admitted to hospital for emotional distress. She spent the next two weeks in a treatment centre, and later said Bradley had broken her fall.

"We're not teachers and we're not scary like a vice-principal – we're this other sort of presence who tries to get to know everyone," he says.

"So if something does come up and kids see something brewing, they'll come and tell us."

The hall monitor system is a sort of cop-on-a-beat approach to school safety, far from the metal detectors of America's blackboard jungle.

Monitor Trish Groom, 45, says raising a teen has taught her the value of the carrot over the stick.

"In this job you often run into teen silliness, and in those cases I don't like to chastise," says Groom, who works at Earl Haig in the morning as a school secretary with handy access to attendance records.

"I'll say, 'I can give you the Mom Lecture or the Hall Monitor Lecture – but the Mom Lecture doesn't involve a trip to the office.'"

Bradley, too, usually adopts a gentler approach. Spotting a Grade 12 girl who is breaching the school's new cellphone ban, he approaches and just stares at her until she closes the phone.

"You don't get any mileage out of letting them have it," he says. "I work very hard not to tell anyone to do anything."

"I try to explain the consequences of what they're doing and then say, 'I leave it to your good judgment – but the easy path is probably not the right one.'"

Somehow, between prodding truants and lending lunch money and consoling the lovesick and snapping team photos and making photocopies for clubs and calming down teens in full freak-out at being locked out of class for being late ("Relax; the teacher will open the door in a few minutes," assures Bradley – and he's right), hall monitors also watch for trouble.

A week ago Bradley noticed a transaction through a classroom window that prompted a call to police and drug charges being laid against a male student and the suspension of a female student.

"I know that girl," recalls Bradley. "She's a good kid who made a bad decision and she was crying when she got caught, and so was I. When she left school with her mother she turned and gave me a big hug.

"And you know, she'll feel comfortable coming back to school and getting on with her life."

Earl Haig principal Bev Ohashi says she couldn't do her job without the hall monitors.

Although relatively peaceful, Earl Haig isn't immune to strife.

There have been thefts of iPods and cellphones, and two students were suspended last week for a fight off school property involving a knife.

Earlier this year, tensions emerged between two groups of students, prompting meetings with school officials to help calm things down.

In that case, halls monitors were among those who sensed trouble brewing.

"The most important part of keeping a school safe is being on top of the relationships in the building," says Ohashi, "but as principal, I'm lucky to get out of my office once a week to walk the halls. Hall monitors have an excellent connection with students."

Bradley works hard to build this bond. In his 15 years as a hall monitor he has been known to sport a ballet tutu for assemblies, pose for art class and pace out a "vector pattern" for a senior physics class.

He even drives a white stretch limo when the weather is good and chauffeurs the kids to events on occasion.

"We love the hall monitors – they definitely help us feel safe, even though in our school the fights are mostly temper tantrums," says Grade 12 student Ally Pintucci.

"Sometimes it's good to just have someone you can talk to," adds student council president Cydon Choi, 17. "Especially about a problem that's not important enough to take to the vice-principal's office or guidance counsellor.

"And you can constantly find the hall monitors because they're constantly in the halls."