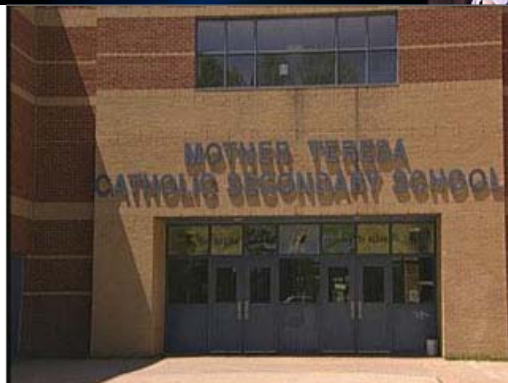


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Board To Worried Parents: Keep Calm And Stay Away During School Lockdown

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CityNews.ca Staff

"Lockdown" is a frightening word, especially if you have kids in a school where the emergency procedure is going on. With so much violence in local learning institutions recently, students and staff have become increasingly familiar with the term and its consequences.

So have parents, who are always tempted to rush down to the affected building, despite knowing the whole point is that no one can get in or out. That eerie feeling was present again Wednesday, after a man was shot to death near Mother Teresa Catholic Secondary School.

But officials were pleading with moms and dads to stay away because their presence only adds more confusion to an already chaotic scene and with a gunman still loose, they could be in potential danger.

"In some cases parents come to the school during a lockdown and through the intercom they're assured their children are safe and advised it's not a safe area and they should leave because of the police activity in the area," explains Catherine Leblanc-Miller of the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

Four other nearby elementary schools - Sacred Heart, St. Bede, St. Columba and St. Gabriel Lalemont, were also placed on lockdown but the edict was lifted by 2pm. Lunches were brought in at a number of the locales and the kids there were kept inside.

Mother of Compassion Daycare Centre is located near the secured high school, and that facility was also immediately placed off limits. Authorities there tried to reassure parents their kids were being well looked after.

It's the same story elsewhere. "Parents have been coming, some of them getting upset, but I just want them to know that their children are safe inside, safer than they are outside," vows principal Catherine Hay of St. Columba.

The kids involved are in Kindergarten to Grade 8, ages about 4-13. She maintains they're a lot calmer than their folks. "They are used to it. We do this as drills and we have had several lockdowns here. But I usually gather them in the gym and explain to them what happened and why it's important for them to stay inside."

During a lockdown, kids are kept in their classrooms, the doors to the building are locked and signs are posted explaining the emergency.

Some parents have used cell phones to reach their children and feel reassured by their answers. Others send text messages or emails. But many of the younger kids themselves aren't fully aware of what's going outside their windows.

"We talk to them over the P.A., we send around cookies, I go from class to class just to let them know that everything's O.K.," explains Hay. "Normally they just play."

While Board officials understand a parent's wish to be as close as possible to their kids, they have a request for this and future cases. "Parents are encouraged to call through the school lines," LeBlanc-Miller suggests. "The lines are still answered. If they're jammed, they can call the School Board office and parents will be updated on what's happening."

In this case, the system worked exactly as it was supposed to, keeping any danger out and the most valuable of all treasures - the youngsters themselves - safe and secure inside.

Previous story:

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