

Few fears among students

'You can be a normal kid here,' says one teen among those unfazed by school violence

Jan 11, 2008 04:30 AM

BRETT POPPLEWELL

MICHELLE HENRY

ROBYN DOOLITTLE

Staff Reporters

Guns in lockers? That's to be expected, they say.

Girls having their rear ends "smacked" in the hallway? It's common, they say.

Boys throwing girls to the ground, kicking snow in their faces and getting a cheap feel? That's just a "snowjob" and it happens in the schoolyard after the snow falls.

So why are the media and the Toronto school board making such a fuss? Students at Emery Collegiate Institute in North York's Jane and Finch area say there's nothing out of the ordinary at their school.

And yet, according to the Falconer report, they – along with students from nearby Westview Centennial Secondary School and C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute – are living in a "culture of fear."

Highlighting several incidents of sexual assault, harassment, violence and weapons crimes in the schools, the report suggests gun-detecting dogs be used in schools.

While the revelations may have shocked the community, students at these schools are unfazed.

"You never know who has something on them," said a candid 18-year-old Ravineet Sing.

When Sing walks Emery's halls, he said he gets a "gut feeling" about certain people and avoids eye contact with them.

But is he scared of his school?

"No. You can be a normal kid here," he said.

Rupinder, 15, said she's not afraid to walk her school's halls. Although they're monitored by teachers and cameras, she said it's not unusual for girls to be gawked at, heckled or "smacked" inappropriately.

Waheeb Qureshi, 14, in what he nonchalantly described as a stickup, said one of his friends was robbed of his shoes at Emery when another student revealed a gun.

"I feel safe because I've got lots of friends in the school so no one will come near me," Qureshi said, after admitting he wouldn't be surprised if there were several guns at the school. "Some people hide them in the lockers."

A few blocks west on Finch Ave., students at Westview Centennial said schoolyard violence doesn't threaten their sense of security.

According to the Falconer report, one in three female students at Westview said she has been sexually harassed at the school.

But Sara Rodriguez, and many of her fellow female students, doesn't believe the report. "All the stuff you see on the news, it's all lies."

However, some students say they take certain hallways to get to class, instead of others, to avoid rolling eyes or confrontations. But that's nothing odd, they say. That's just the result of regular peer pressure.

"It's different for people who live outside of the area," said Samira Ali, 15. "But it's safe for us."

One of the reasons they feel safe may rest in the abilities and size of the burly security guards who roam the school as hall monitors.

Farther west on Finch near Keele St., students of C.W. Jefferys said their school isn't the same place it used to be. "Ever since the new principal came, things are different," said Naria Shahabi, 17.

Kids aren't hanging around the hallway during class, a dress code is being enforced and students aren't afraid, Shahabi said.

But not everyone is happy.

"Knowing I have to come here, you don't even want to wake up in the morning," said Ryan Williams, 17. "We don't get a fair chance. Be honest. If you saw me walking down the street. A tall black man in baggy jeans, you just assume I'm a bad guy. You'd be worried. And I'm not like that, but people treat me that way.

"People judge a book by its cover."