

Just how much will school safety cost?

The reality: Millions of dollars, and delicate labour negotiations

Jan 12, 2008 04:30 AM

LOUISE BROWN

DANIEL GIRARD

EDUCATION REPORTERS

How much would school safety cost?

How much money, how much haggling with unions, how much buy-in from parents, how much change to Ontario law would it take to make Julian Falconer's vision a reality?

The Toronto lawyer left the price-tag off the 126 recommendations he made this week in his sweeping 1,000-page report on safety in Toronto's schools, prompted by the death of student Jordan Manners last May.

But many of his suggestions, from hiring more social workers to lowering class size, cost money that would have to come from Queen's Park, which already gave Ontario schools an extra \$43 million last year to boost safety, from training and prevention programs to more of the very experts Falconer is calling for.

Other proposals, like more teacher supervision, would mean changing union contracts that could fracture the delicate labour peace that has settled on schools.

Still other suggestions – sniffer spaniels, mandatory uniforms, programs to promote respect between the sexes in the hormone-charged hallways of high school – would involve a range of steps and partnerships.

Here is an early reality check for some key points in Falconer's plan of action:

1. RECOMMENDATION

More teachers supervising in halls.

REALITY: This won't happen without push-back from Toronto's high school teachers' union, which fought hard in 2001 to win the fewest required hours of supervision of any school board in the province.

Under that contract, Toronto's 6,000 high school teachers may be assigned by their principals to supervise halls or fill in for an absent colleague no more than 27 times a year, or about 40 minutes a week on average – and only on a "time-to-time basis," not on a regular schedule. Up to five more periods can be assigned on "exceptional" grounds.

Yet the average teacher is not being asked to do more than about 15 half-periods a year on average, notes Doug Jolliffe, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation in Toronto.

"Teachers are busy with what they're trained for; they've got to prepare lessons, mark, get professional development on new programs," said Jolliffe.

"And they would need more training and backup for more supervision; more workshops in how to deal with angry, angry students and more back-up from the office for when they tell some kid not to smoke on school property and the kid just tells you to f--- off."

2. RECOMMENDATION

More adults in the schools, from hall monitors and social workers to attendance counsellors and youth workers, and more teachers in high-needs areas to allow for smaller classes.

REALITY: These all take cash.

For 20 new social workers, at roughly \$60,000 apiece, the board would need about \$1.2 million. Twenty more child and youth counsellors for needy high schools, at about \$40,000 apiece, would cost about \$800,000 and 20 attendance counsellors, at about \$50,000 each, means another \$1 million.

In a way, this would be a move back to the future. Back in 2002, the board scrapped 13 youth counsellors, 24 attendance counsellors and cut social workers to save \$1.5 million under orders from supervisor Paul Christie, sent in by the Conservative government to balance the budget.

Yet the board still struggles to balance the books with a looming shortfall of \$51 million, so new staff would need new dollars from the province.

As for more hall monitors, the board already has 157 of these plain-clothes patrols – part bouncer, part mentor – who earn a scant \$30,000 a year, which the board has to scrounge from various corners of its \$2.3 billion budget because Queen's Park does not fund this type of worker.

These non-teaching staff who watch for intruders, break up fights and shut down drug deals are not at all 104 high schools; it depends on whether the principal feels a need and they are often clustered in high-needs neighbourhoods.

3. RECOMMENDATION

All students should wear uniforms unless a school council opts out.

REALITY: While each school has a dress code barring clothing that has gang affiliations, profanity, violence and other slogans deemed indecent, only a small percentage have students wearing uniforms.

The report notes there's little conclusive research on the effectiveness of uniforms on student discipline, school climate or perceptions of safety. But uniforms and visible school ID badges worn around the neck would allow school staff to "quickly identify intruders," the report concludes.

Mandatory uniforms will no doubt draw opposition from many students and parents who say it violates freedom of choice and adds an unfair cost – arguments that have arisen in the past. Falconer's panel suggests that a school council, typically parents and the principal, could vote to say thanks, but no thanks.

The panel agreed that uniforms should be affordable, as well as complying with the Ontario Human Rights Code, and calls for the board to subsidize students if necessary.

Proponents of uniforms say they help identify people who don't belong in the school and also reduce the competition kids have over clothing, especially for those who cannot afford it.

4. RECOMMENDATION

Board-owned firearms sniffer dogs should be used for regular random searches for guns in lockers.

REALITY: Insisting guns "pose a significant threat in Toronto schools," the panel's call for random sniffer dog searches is one of its most controversial recommendations.

It comes with legal complications, particularly around the issue of the Charter of Rights and Freedom's protection from unreasonable search and seizure.

In the past, schools have called on the Toronto police canine unit after receiving credible information that weapons are on site. This unit uses small dogs, such as spaniels, that are trained to identify gunpowder. Two or three dogs can search a typical school in two or three hours.

But, the report notes, it's "fairly clear that police do not have the power to use canines to randomly sweep schools for weapons or other contraband."

School officials have a broader power than police to search students and school property because of their responsibility and authority to maintain order, discipline and safety, notes the report – it's just not clear whether this would include random searches by sniffer dogs.

There is a case before the Supreme Court of Canada about a controversial random school search by drug-sniffing dogs in a Sarnia school in 2002; that search turned up drugs in a backpack in a school gym.

An Ontario Court of Appeal ruled nearly two years ago that the search by the Ontario Provincial Police violated the youth's rights, and that decision is being appealed.

Until that case is resolved, it's unlikely the Toronto board would push ahead with searches Falconer's report acknowledges would be "on the frontier of what's permitted" by the Charter, but in line with schools' duty to protect students.

The panel said changes to the Education Act could help clear this up.