

Lockdowns a new way of life at school nowadays, they're as common as a fire drill; Children face more safety drills, restricted cellphone use; Protocol fine-tuned by school boards, police last summer

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Louise Brown

Lockdowns. Video surveillance. Alarming images of a Toronto high school under siege - it can seem like Canada's public schools are becoming a Blackboard Jungle.

Indeed, with 25 lockdowns called each year across Toronto's 568 public schools - a figure that has held steady for three years - the concept of locking a school down for students' safety has become almost commonplace.

Even a decade ago, the only drills most students held were fire drills. When a violent situation arose, either in or near a school, principals often made up rules on the fly.

Today, in a post-Columbine world, school boards have worked out standard lockdown procedures with police, and the notion of a lockdown is becoming more commonplace.

Still, the term "lockdown" sends shivers down a parent's spine, even parents who have been through one themselves.

"I'm a teacher and we had a three-hour lockdown last year at my high school because of a drive-by shooting - and after a while, a lockdown gets dreadfully boring," said Scarborough art teacher Clarice Thornton, whose two daughters attend Toronto's Rosedale Heights School of the Arts.

"But I realize the purpose of a lockdown is to keep everyone safe until danger has passed."

Still, as she drove home last Thursday, Thornton heard a Toronto school was in lockdown - and her heart stopped.

"Please don't let it be Rosedale! That's all I kept thinking, over and over until I heard which school it was. Please don't let it be my kids' school.

"As a teacher, I know a lockdown is probably the safest place to be - but as a parent, it's a completely different story. You panic."

It was Victoria Park Collegiate in Scarborough that issued a lockdown Thursday afternoon after two 17-year-old boys were stabbed during the lunch hour outside the school.

Following the new lockdown protocol hammered out jointly last summer by the Toronto Police Services and the city's public and Catholic school boards - a sign lockdowns are here to stay as an official safety procedure - students were confined to specific areas within the school while police conducted their search. After 2 1/2 hours, a 17-year-old student was arrested and charged and the lockdown was lifted.

Counsellors were available at the school yesterday to support students who were troubled.

But it may be the parents who need counselling during a lockdown. Many expressed concern at the time that they could not find out whether their child was safe - although the school reported the lockdown on its answering machine and secretaries scrambled to field calls.

Students are asked not to use cell phones during a lockdown under the lockdown protocol, designed to ensure a consistency in how schools handle these situations.

The cell phone ban - although tough to enforce - is meant to keep students from being distracted from following instructions, said Donna Quan, the public board's assistant superintendent of safe schools - and also to avoid the spread of rumours.

Lockdowns are not frequent. The Toronto District School Board reports about 20 partial lockdowns a year; these are incidents when the doors into the school are locked because a violent crime has been committed nearby and police are still looking for the culprit - but often classes continue inside.

More rare are full lockdowns, where the danger is believed to be in the school itself and students are kept locked in classrooms, usually away from windows and doors and sometimes under their desks.

About 15 of these have been called at the TDSB in the past three years.

Still, students at most GTA schools are put through a "lockdown drill" twice a year.

Schools have no choice, says safety expert Stu Auty. Although they remain a relatively safe haven, the violence around them is a fact they cannot ignore.

"Kids have always got into fights, but today's reality is that they're more ready to use weapons to solve them," said Auty, president of the **Canadian Safe School Network**.

Hall monitor David Bradley has seen teens become more quick to turn to weapons than 15 years ago when he first began to patrol the halls of Toronto's high schools.

"For some reason, tempers seem to be shorter than when I began in 1991, and they see violence as the answer a little more often - and I don't know why," said Bradley, who has been a hall monitor at Toronto's Lawrence Park Collegiate and Earl Haig Secondary School in North York.

"Sometimes, I have to say, the disputes are among groups of students of different origin. These are the ones that seem harder to defuse."

Bradley said hall monitors get to know "what's normal" at a school - who eats lunch where, who drives which car, who hangs out where and when - so they can spot something that's not "normal" and intervene.