

Mentors preferred to detectors

Cameras coming, but board officials say 'our mandate is prevention, not policing'

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Ontario educators say mentors, not metal detectors, are the key to keeping schools safe, after a Grade 9 student was shot dead in a North York school.

In the wake of the shooting of 15-year-old Jordan Manners, C.W. Jefferys Collegiate will immediately add an extra vice-principal, a third hall monitor and two youth workers to connect with at-risk students, said Donna Quan, safe schools superintendent for the Toronto District School Board.

Board officials also said security cameras will be installed sooner than anticipated. Unlike office buildings and condos, schools do not have security staff to monitor these cameras "live," but save the footage for later use in investigations.

At a staff meeting at the school yesterday, suggestions for additional security measures included keeping doors locked throughout the day, introducing school uniforms and a stiffer code of conduct.

But the school, and others across the province, have no plan to bring in airport-style metal scanners in response to the first fatal shooting in a Toronto school in memory. "A metal detector can't be on every window and tools of destruction can be non-metal, so our mandate is prevention, not policing, through building trust and having extra eyes and ears throughout the halls," said Quan.

The board has asked its 550 schools to review security measures, including having more than two yearly "Code Red" lockdown drills for emergencies like the one Wednesday, when Manners' body was found.

The focus on using human beings, not gizmos, to protect kids was echoed across Ontario.

School administrators will review security and emergency response planning in the light of the shooting, said Rick Johnson, head of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association.

"It's an ugly reminder of what we're all up against and what we have to be aware of," said Johnson of the Trillium-Lakelands District School Board.

But Johnson said schools must guard against adopting "a bunker mentality." He called for more emphasis on conflict resolution, after-school programs and mentoring, as well as efforts to reduce kids' exposure to media glorification of violence.

"I'd rather our schools were seen as welcoming places where people can work things out rather than feel you've got to be afraid of everybody who walks in the door," Johnson said.

Liberal MPP Liz Sandals, a predecessor of Johnson and head of a task force on new safe schools legislation, said educators in the U.S., where metal detectors and other security are commonplace, feel such measures have a detrimental impact on a school's atmosphere.

With so many unanswered questions, retired Toronto police officer John Muise said "it's a legitimate conversation" to talk about beefing up security. But, he warned, all interested parties must examine the impact of such a move.

"There's no question that if you go with metal detectors, security guards, a more fortress mentality, you end up with a much different-looking school," said Muise, director of public safety for the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness.

What Canadian schools must do is tackle the violent, hardboiled mindset of many children today, said Stu Auty, director of the Canadian Safe School Network and chair of Ontario's Safe Schools Task Force.

"Gangs are a form of family that can appeal to marginalized kids, kids who feel they're outside looking in," said Auty. "But if schools can help fill that sense of family and community early on, maybe we can steer them in a different direction."