

# Schools struggle to root out sources of violence

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One week before Jordan Manners was killed at C.W. Jefferys, a student at an east-end Toronto high school was severely beaten by as many as 50 students as 200 others watched.

No guns were fired, the victim – though badly injured – didn't die and the story didn't make the news, but it was proof that violence is endemic in Toronto high schools, say trustees and teachers.

"Something's going on that we have to get a handle on somehow," said Doug Jolliffe, who heads the Toronto district of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.

Even though Manners' murder in May thrust the spotlight on high schools in the city's northwest end – a report last week cited "serious safety concerns" at several of them – almost all the city's high schools have had their share of assaults on teachers or students, not to mention bullying and intimidation.

"It's not the cachet gangsters have, but it's just as serious," Jolliffe said.

Toronto Trustee Cathy Dandy goes one step further. She believes "what happened at C.W. Jefferys could happen anywhere."

That's because students are going to school in buildings that are falling apart, while trying to juggle a fast-paced curriculum with too much content, all compounded by "a lack of social and emotional support," she said.

In light of Manners' murder, several individuals and groups are calling for more supports for students – such as more

guidance counsellors, social workers, attendance counsellors, child and youth workers – saying students' connections with adults in a school are the key to success.

"We have lost a tremendous (number) of adults – people don't realize the impact of the loss," said Jolliffe, citing cutbacks made by the government of former Conservative premier Mike Harris.

Some of the schools are so large that "areas where before you'd find somebody there – a caretaker, a hall monitor, a school supervisor, a teacher – are now deserted.

"It's absolutely necessary for the board (and union) to sit down – we are doing it informally now ... to start tackling the problem and figuring out how to solve it systematically. ... There needs to be strong, consistent policies," rather than school-by-school variations.

The Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation has launched a province-wide campaign calling for "educational teams" to help students both academically and socially. The teams would include caretakers and school secretaries.

After Manners was killed, the Toronto District School Board struck a panel, headed by lawyer Julian Falconer, which released an interim report last week on the conditions at C.W. Jefferys.

While it identified serious problems there – almost 40 per cent of students reported they had been threatened with physical harm, and 37 per cent said they had been assaulted – the panel felt the numbers would be no different at any other Toronto school.

It also said the transfer of criminal or violent students – "safe schools" transfers – was leading to more serious trouble. There are 600 safe schools transfers a year within the Toronto public board, which has about 280,000 students in total, of which 89,000 are secondary school.

Jolliffe said his union is calling for a code of conduct for students and staff, to be followed to the letter, that distinguishes between "normal goofy adolescent behaviour and stuff that is making staff and students wary."

As well, when students are transferred for criminal or other violent behaviour, "the transfer must be done so that they actually get help for their needs, rather than just being booted to a new school," he said.

Gerry Connelly, the Toronto board's director of education, said the issues identified by the panel "are not the problem – they are the symptom of much deeper problems that need to be addressed.

"These are students who have lost hope."

She said the board needs more social agencies to work with schools and students, more after-school resources and more programs.

"We want to add guidance counsellors and other professional supports but it's a struggle because of (budget) limitations."

Over the past few years, some Ontario boards have reported increased access to professional staff such as social workers and psychologists, but say it's not enough.

Last week, Education Minister Kathleen Wynne announced an additional \$10.5 million a year to bring in roughly 170 psychologists, social workers, youth workers and attendance counsellors to schools in Ontario, the equivalent of two to three support workers per board.

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*With files from Iain Marlow*