

Student transfer policy spreads gang ills: Panel

Aug 30, 2007 04:30 AM

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TORONTO STAR

Transferring troubled – even criminal – students between schools in the city's northwest end is one of the biggest safety issues facing C.W. Jefferys, says a report examining conditions at the school where 15-year-old Jordan Manners was shot and killed.

In fact, the "serious safety concerns" about the high schools close to Jefferys prompted the School Community Safety Advisory Panel to ask to extend its mandate to other schools in the area, as well as extend its deadline – and boost its budget.

At public hearings held in mid-August, community members frequently mentioned Westview Centennial, a nearby high school, as having problems more serious than those at Jefferys.

In fact, several Jefferys teachers told the *Star* that Westview was using transfers to break up gangs within the school.

Panel chair Julian Falconer has previously called such transfers a way to deal with "the walking wounded" without any additional funding.

"As consultations with teachers continued, it became apparent that safe-school transfers were a significant issue at C.W. Jefferys, which receives more safe-school transfers than it sends out to other schools," says the panel's report, released yesterday.

Jefferys last year took in 11 safe-school transfers, and sent out six; Westview took in 13, but sent out 21. Safe-school transfers are used to move students involved in serious or criminal incidents.

The panel does note the data "should not be interpreted as labelling any school as safer than its sister schools."

Last night, the Toronto District School Board's director of education said the board does not have adequate programs for such students.

"The issue of safe-school transfers has been an issue across the city because of the limited number of alternative programs that we've been able to provide," said Gerry Connelly.

The panel found that while many C.W. Jefferys students feel safe, they are still worried about personal theft and gangs.

In a survey of about half of all students, conducted before school let out last June, 37 per cent said they were physically assaulted, without a weapon, over the past two years.

One out of every five students reported they had been assaulted more than once.

While Falconer called the survey results "disturbing," he said the statistics are consistent with past studies across North America and likely hold across the city.

"Crime and victimization are serious problems for students at C.W. Jefferys, but sadly, these problems do not appear isolated within C.W. Jefferys or even within other schools in the `Jane-Finch'

community," the report's executive summary says. "Crime and victimization are apparently a reality faced by students at many schools throughout the Toronto region."

"C.W. Jefferys is a reasonably healthy school, not dissimilar to any other healthy school – which should actually cause you to be more concerned," Falconer said at a press conference yesterday.

After Manners' murder, several teachers came forward saying there was a core group of students wreaking havoc in the school, and that administrators were not properly disciplining students.

The principal and two vice-principals are on home assignment after allegations they were told of a sexual assault on a Muslim girl and did not report it.

The problem with safe-school transfers is that when these students arrive at a new school, teachers do not know of their past troubles. They often have criminal backgrounds and anger management issues, and receive no counselling or programming at their new school, the panel was told.

Even former principal Charis Newton-Thompson told the panel these program-less safe school transfers became harmful influences on the population of the receiving school.

Gang activity at Westview, considered one of the city's neediest high schools, is a major concern.

Indeed, one student interviewed by the panel said: "If two kids fight in one school ... what the school does is that they send one kid to one school with a whole new record, and they send one kid to another school with a whole new record. We have a lot of kids from Westview, who are a pain. Because then the kids at this school are like, 'That's my turf.' You know, that whole gang thing?"

However, Clayton Thomas, a youth worker and volunteer in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood, said Westview is better now than it was before, especially with the recent addition of uniforms.

Much of the improvement, Thomas added, is a result of the school's administration utilizing the safe schools transfer to shift "gangsters" from Westview to other schools in the community, such as Jefferys.

A current Jefferys teacher said the school had an influx of known gang members that had been transferred out of Westview into several schools to break them up.

Doug Jolliffe, head of the Toronto local of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, said while there are definite safety issues at Westview, "there are problems in a lot of the schools in Toronto regarding safety."

"We've got to have some central approach ... for dealing with students who are clearly disrupting the education process for staff and students. We don't just kick them out. But we need to start programs and get the staff in there to help them. They can't just simply ignore them or move them to another school."

Late last night, the Toronto board voted to accept all four recommendations with a condition on the November extension that a budget must first be submitted and funding secured.

Trustee Josh Matlow said the panel has likely cost about \$1 million already if its use of board staff and resources is included.

"Frankly, we don't have a budget for this, and we don't have any funding source to implement a single recommendation that Mr. Falconer brings forward," said Matlow.

He said the panel was only created to fend off negative stories in the media about conditions in Jefferys.

Classroom fears

37%

of C.W. Jefferys students surveyed say they have been physically assaulted at the school

33%

of female students worry they'll be sexually assaulted or molested

40%

say weapons are a serious problem

55%

say fighting is a serious problem

49%

say drugs are a serious problem

46%

say gangs are a serious problem