

## **Toronto schools plagued with violence: panel**

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A revamped approach is needed to address the widespread violence at Toronto schools, which are littered with dangerous weapons such as guns and knives, an advisory panel says.

The board-appointed School Safety Community Advisory Panel, headed by human rights lawyer Julian Falconer, says there are a high number of unreported violent incidents at schools across the district, including sexual assaults.

"The lack of safety comes from disengaged, marginalized youth that we have been unable to help as a society," Falconer said at a news conference on Thursday afternoon.

"We as a society are responsible to assist the Toronto District School Board in discharging their mandate to provide a nurturing environment for the youth that enter their halls.

"There is no magic formula, no quick fix to removing what has been an ongoing endemic problem in select schools across the city."

Falconer said punishment, such as unnecessary suspensions, are having the opposite effect when it comes to better protecting students.

"We miss the point if we believe that the road to health involves punishing or using enforcement methods to try to re-engage youth. It doesn't work. We suspend in droves; it fails."

The panel was formed after the fatal shooting of 15-year-old Jordan Manners inside C.W. Jefferys Collegiate last May.

Their 1,000-page [report](#) was originally set to be released on Monday, but copies were leaked to the media, and details were published on Thursday morning.

### **Troubling incidents**

The report, which uncovered an alarming number of unreported incidents of violence and sexual assault, recommends -- among other things -- random locker searches and using trained dogs to sniff out guns hidden in school lockers.

Since January 2006, the panel says it found more than 170 incidents of violence, including robberies, gun incidents and sexual assaults.

At Westview Centennial Secondary School, in the troubled Jane and Finch Streets corridor in the city's northwest where C.W. Jefferys is located, a school survey found 23 per cent of students knew somebody who had brought a gun to school in the previous two years. Almost one-quarter of the teens said they saw a gun at school.

Falconer said the violence isn't limited to the one area, as there were 54 reported gun incidents outside the Jane-Finch area.

"Nothing can be further from the truth that this is a problem involving the black kids from Jane and Finch," Falconer said. "That is simply an utter, specious myth. This is a problem we as a society share."

After interviewing staff and students, panel members found:

- A high number of violent incidents in schools go unreported
- Nearly 20 per cent of female students at one school say they were sexually assaulted on school grounds
- Some 80 per cent of sex assault victims at one school said they wouldn't report the attack
- There is a lack of confidence the board can ensure school environments that are free of weapons and violence

The report, which has cost the board more than \$800,000, says there is a culture of silence among students, staff and principals when it comes to reporting violent incidents.

Earlier this week, Toronto police announced they have charged a former principal and two vice-principals at C.W. Jefferys under the Ontario Child and Family Services Act with failing to report an alleged sexual assault on a female student.

It is alleged that the assault was reported to administrators but that they did not forward the complaint to authorities.

### **Recommendations**

The report lists more than 120 recommendations to curb violence in schools. Some of the key recommendations are:

- Regularly searching lockers for any signs of weapons
- Using firearm-detecting canine units to sniff out lockers and storage areas
- Setting up a website for teens to anonymously report violent acts
- Hiring full-time social workers and counsellors at schools with high cases of violence

"You could fill a Home Hardware with the amount of knives kids bring to school," Falconer said.

"There are guns in the schools, in non-trivial numbers, in select schools across the city, and neither the Toronto District School Board nor the Toronto Police Service are in a position to track the amount of guns in any given school."

Installing metal detectors in the more than 150 secondary schools is an "extraordinarily expensive venture" that is not feasible, Falconer said.

He says the key to reducing violence is addressing the root causes of violence, and this can only be done with more money from the Ministry of Education.

"Jordan Manners died on May 23, 2007 out of flat neglect -- pure neglect. There was insufficient supports in place in our system to encourage him to make better choices," Falconer said.

"The reality is, disengaged youth, no matter how small the number, can completely transform an environment if no steps are taken to address their needs."

Manners' mother, Lorraine Small, said she is pleased with the board's approach and hopes it will make schools safer.

*With reports from CTV Toronto's Paul Bliss and Naomi Parness*