

Why schools aren't safe

Jordan Manners' death illustrates how board lacks resources to help the students it serves

Jan 11, 2008 04:30 AM

KRISTIN RUSHOWY

LOUISE BROWN

EDUCATION REPORTERS

Jordan Manners died of "pure neglect" – a result of the cutbacks to the kinds of supports at-risk students need, says the head of a panel that has delivered a stinging indictment of safety in the city's high schools.

The Toronto District School Board is "nowhere near sufficiently funded to manage" the diverse students it serves, and, to this day, doesn't provide enough social workers or child and youth workers to C.W. Jefferys Collegiate, where Manners was shot to death last May, Julian Falconer said.

"Jordan Manners died on May 23, 2007, of flat neglect – pure neglect," he told reporters at a press conference at board headquarters yesterday.

"There were insufficient supports in place in our system to encourage him to make better choices," he said, adding society at large is to blame for what's happened "and we need to fix it."

During the months of interviews and research for the report, the three-member panel heard from countless teens about weapons in schools.

"You could fill a Home Hardware with the amount of knives kids bring to school," Falconer said. "But we don't find them."

Full of graphic, even gripping findings, the 1,000-page tome includes a five-page retelling of the shooting death of Jordan Manners based on interviews of those at the school that May afternoon – from the moment the 15-year-old boy asked to be excused from his business class to go to the washroom, to the moment some 20 minutes later when teacher Eric Colquhoun found him lying on his stomach near a stairway, in medical distress.

Too, there are disturbing details of the alleged assault of a female Muslim student in a school washroom by six males, who have since been charged with gang sexual assault. The report devotes a section to a troubling climate of sexual aggression in the halls and recommends many changes to address the problem.

"This report is a call to action, and act we will," said board chair John Campbell, adding, however, that "the school board cannot solve all the problems that face our youth."

Trustee Cathy Dandy, who heads the board's working group on student safety, said the group is meeting tomorrow and will develop a timeline for implementing the panel recommendations as well as decide what can be implemented immediately and what's already underway.

"We are not just going to blunder forward on this," she said.

Falconer said that while the province is putting money back into school boards for counsellors and hall monitors, "it's not enough and not fast enough."

In Ottawa yesterday, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty said he looks forward to working with the Toronto board on the report's proposals.

"We'll be taking a close look at the report and seeing what more we can do together, in order to ensure that when parents send their kids off to school, they are genuinely safe.

"The fact of the matter is that there are millions of children who attend school every single day in Ontario and they do so safely and without incident. Not to say that there aren't some real issues in some communities and we need to do more to address those."

In the report, Falconer paints the picture of a school system where some black students tell authorities "it is easier to get a gun than a job."

At yesterday's press conference, where the board officially released the final report, Falconer said, "The truth is, there are guns in our schools in non-trivial numbers across the city and neither the police or the TDSB are in the position to track guns at any given school."

Among his recommendations is for the board to consider locker searches as well as bring in gun-sniffing dogs for random searches in high schools around the city.

Gerry Connelly, the board's director of education, said board staff are working with the police to keep guns out of schools.

"We're going to have to consider" both those suggestions, she said, adding police told her they don't have sniffer dogs for weapons, although such specially trained animals do exist.

"The report addresses a really important and complex issue that we don't have the answer to," Connelly said. "We can't search out every gun."

Falconer yesterday said to forget visions of tactical officers with big dogs roaming the hallways – he was talking about springer spaniels who would do a sweep down a hallway of lockers.

His report also condemns the use of suspensions as discipline, saying sending students home if they live in a shelter, or simply waste time waiting to return to school, serves no purpose.

"We suspend in droves, and it fails."

He also made it clear that violent incidents occur across the city, and not just in the northwest end. In fact, his panel found that of 54 gun incidents from January 2006 to November 2007, just three were in that area.

Some 30 incidents with knives or Tasers were reported in high schools, and 31 sexual assaults on school property.

"Nothing could be further from the truth that this is a problem involving the black kids at Jane and Finch," he added.

He also rapped the board for its culture of fear, where teachers and staff and students are afraid to speak out.

And despite the violence, he argued against a return to zero-tolerance plans, which he said "do not work."

"Marginalized youth cannot be punished into becoming engaged," he said.

- With files from Susan Delacourt and Daniel Girard

Questionnaires pull back curtain at two schools

Students and staff at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate and Westview Centennial Secondary School filled out questionnaires on the prevalence of guns and weapons in their schools, sexual assault and crimes they have witnessed. At Jefferys, 423 students (50.5 per cent) and 51 staff (63 per cent) sent in questionnaires. At Westview, 870 students (72 per cent) and 39 staff (35 per cent) participated. Among the responses:

Students and Guns, Weapons and Robbery:

18 per cent of Jefferys students and 15 per cent at Westview say they have been threatened with a weapon at school.

37 per cent of Westview students say they have been assaulted at school in the past two years.

22.5 per cent of Westview students say they have seen a gun at school in the past two years, and 5 per cent have seen a gun on four or more occasions.

11 per cent of Jefferys students and 10 per cent at Westview say they have been assaulted with a weapon at school in the past two years.

12 per cent of Jefferys students and 2.9 per cent at Westview say they have had a gun pointed at them in the past two years.

Staff and Safety:

22 per cent of the 51 Jefferys staff who responded say they feel unsafe at school.

94 per cent of students at both schools are not white; most teachers at both schools are.

86 per cent of Jefferys teachers report having seen drunk students, and 74 per cent at Westview.

40 per cent of Westview teachers say they have seen a student theft.

48 per cent of black students said they feel discrimination in marks and discipline; few teachers at either school said they believe racism is an issue.

Gangs:

39 Westview students (4.8 per cent of respondents) claim to belong to a gang; 93 (11.8 per cent) said they have been in the past.

Nearly 70 per cent of Westview gang members and 63 per cent at Jefferys say they have seen a gun at school in the past two years.

Knives:

52 per cent of Westview students said they have seen a knife at school in the past two years, and 19 per cent say they have seen a knife on four or more occasions.

141 Westview students (16.4 per cent) admit they have brought a knife to school in the past two years, and 51 students (6 per cent) have done so "on many occasions."

73 students (8.5 per cent) have been threatened by someone with a knife at school.

Sexual Assault:

19 per cent of female students at Jefferys and 7 per cent of females at Westview said they had been victim of a sexual assault at school in the past two years, with black and white girls victimized more often than those of Asian and South Asian background.

29 per cent of female students at Westview said they have experienced unwanted sexual contact (touching and grabbing) in the past two years.

VOICES

I made a brief announcement before lunch (about the report) and the fact that the media was at Jefferys, and I urged students to continue to focus on the future and to try and move this momentum that we've gained to a higher level.

Jim Spyropoulos, principal, C.W. Jefferys

If there are people who are experiencing violence, or are afraid to talk about violence that they are experiencing, that's unacceptable. Is it my experience that there's a pervasive culture of fear or violence in the Toronto board? No, that is not my personal experience.

Education Minister **Kathleen Wynne**, involved in the Toronto board as parent and trustee

The big picture is not that schools are going into the ditch – because they're not. But are there kids who need assistance? Of course, and the Ontario government should cut a cheque right away for more social workers, psychologists, more adults supervising in schools.

Stu Auty, chair, Canadian Safe School Network

I'm not disagreeing there is some culture of fear in schools – some scary things happen and there are certain places in some schools where teachers don't want to go, even in pairs, even with walkie-talkies. But if the report gives the impression schools are a war zone, I'm not happy because overall, most kids are okay.

Doug Jolliffe, president, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, Toronto District

Our whole approach to community safety is exactly that, building partnerships in neighbourhoods. That's why our recreational strategy, for example, significantly increases the access to recreational programs of people of low income, very dramatically. All governments, and the private sector and the non-profit sector have a role to play.

Toronto Mayor **David Miller**

Just as rural and northern schools have particular issues, so do urban schools and it is imperative we address them. Let's focus on prevention rather than finding more ways to simply lock down our schools. There must be increased funding for social workers, psychologists, guidance counsellors and youth workers.

Annie Kidder, executive director, People For Education