

**THE ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION
SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF ROOTS OF YOUTH VIOLENCE
February 15, 2008**

Good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence. I am Colleen Schenk, President of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association and joining me today is John Muise of the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness and a former member of the Toronto Police Service. I will talk about the concerns and responsibilities of the school system and John will talk specifically to models of partnership that have proven effective in addressing youth violence.

While I want to talk about the role of schools in the life of our youth and, in particular, the role of schools in helping young people to become caring, responsible citizens, I also want to talk about schools as just one of the many circles of influence in our society. It has become a cliché to say "it takes a village to raise a child." Clichés, however, come into being because they are essentially very true. Schools need to be part of the village, an important part of the village even, but certainly not the whole village.

If we take a look at what society has put on the shoulders of the school system over the years, we see a kaleidoscope of issues that extend far beyond the 3 R's. Education now embraces integrated curriculum, or programs, or units of study on: nutrition, the environment, drug and alcohol abuse, character development, driver safety, street-proofing, global awareness, diversity and inclusion, safe Internet use, sexual abuse prevention, anti-smoking, anti-homophobia, conflict resolution, peace-making, peer leadership. This is not an exhaustive list. What do all these things have in common with each other and with the concerns of this Review of the Roots of Youth Violence?

They all relate to responding effectively to the whole child, to helping him or her grow up healthy, strong, and aware of their responsibilities to society and to the world at large. This is not just a school issue; it is not just a family issue; it is not just a community issue. It is a "whole village" issue and it concerns all of us.

Our particular concern here today is violence among young people and how we can prevent it. It's important to separate out perception from reality. I'd like to quote from the federal report on *Youth Violence and Youth Gangs: Responding to Community Concerns*, prepared by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in 1994:

Public perceptions about the level of youth violence have also changed with greater public attention toward issues such as sexual assault, child abuse and dating violence. Sensationalized media accounts of youth violence have also heightened public fear and concern. Together, these factors contribute to a climate of growing unease and fear, less tolerance, increased reporting and more vocal public demands

for action. Thus, while it is evident that the number of charges involving youth violence has increased in recent years, it is not clear whether the actual amount of youth violence and youth gang activity has increased.

A 2002 publication by the Canadian Health Network also raises questions about the prevalence of youth violence and has useful advice on prevention. The 1994 report indicated that the youth justice system today is much more legalistic in its implementation and that many more young people are being charged and incarcerated - for longer periods - under the *Young Offenders Act (1984)* than was the case under the *Juvenile Delinquents Act (1908)*. More importantly, however, is the continuing relevance of the wealth of advice and practical suggestions this report provides for communities dealing with youth violence issues.

Perception is a powerful thing and the school system has to show that it is doing everything within its power to prevent violence and provide safe learning and working environments for all its students and employees. School boards work hard to make schools a safe haven. Although the vast majority of students feel safe at school, as long as there is violence in our communities, there will always be a risk of it seeping into schools. Needless to say schools take this very seriously; they are vigilant about the influences that bring violence into the lives of children and they work to mitigate the factors that predispose children to respond with violence.

There is plenty of research on the risk factors for violence among youth – factors such as poverty, dysfunctional and fractured families, socially disorganized and troubled neighbourhoods, absence of positive role models, poor access to conventional activities, lack of parental involvement in children’s lives and in their education.

The school system cannot tackle all of these issues alone – that is a job for the “whole village.” However, here are some of the many things that schools do to nurture and protect children from the influences and outcomes of violence:

- anti-bullying, peer mediation, restorative justice, character education and other innovative programs in place that promote emotional and social competence
- prepare children to understand the destructive effects of violence
- prepare children with strategies and resources to protect themselves from violent behaviour
- have clear policies, procedures and practices that prohibit violent behaviour and actions in all their manifestations
- ensure that school administrators, teachers and other school staff take responsibility for maintaining a safe school environment and a culture of caring through adequate supervision, intervention and role modelling
- ensure that children know that there are adults in the school to whom they can report threats and incidents safely
- have alternative programs for students who have been suspended or expelled to keep them engaged in their education and provide them with counselling and support to help them change the behaviours that led to disciplinary action.

Again this is not a complete list but it does give an overview of what schools do to prevent violence and promote pro-social behaviour. Beyond this are the many programs that schools have to help students overcome disadvantages. These would include breakfast and lunch programs, homework clubs, summer programs, mentorship, intensive tuition, or work experience initiatives. All of these programs and strategies work together to create a climate of caring and a strong response to the effects of violence in the school setting. These are effective and necessary but still cannot eradicate the root causes of violence that take us beyond the perimeter of the school.

Recently, we have seen a great deal of media focus, with all the attendant sensational headlines, on the report of School Community Safety Advisory Panel commissioned by the Toronto District School Board. When the Panel issued its Interim Report last August, I was struck in particular by this statement:

“Our schools will only be safe and equitable if our communities are safe and equitable. In light of this reality, addressing the root causes of violence and crime must be a high priority.”

We know that there is no single root cause. The calls for action cover a lot of fronts: banning handguns, tackling poverty and racism, providing community programs and accessible recreation facilities, increasing building security, engaging students more strongly in school. All of these things are needed and taking action on them is the right thing to do. There are no quick fixes.

Speaking for the school system, we have to expand and strengthen the kinds of initiatives I have identified. We need to make sure that in doing so we are engaging young people in leadership roles and that we are involving their parents and the wider community. We need our broader society to see the education system as an investment in Ontario’s future citizens not as a separate place reserved for four- to eighteen- year olds. Schools should be adequately resourced to meet the challenges. That means having youth workers and counselors, social workers, community outreach workers, safety monitors, translators and interpreters as a normal and expected part of the school staff. That means having resources to engage with community agencies to run before and after school activities, to run summer programs, to offer initiatives that will help young people get part-time work and summer jobs.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of partnerships with municipal organizations and community agencies outside of the education sector. The Ontario Public School Boards’ Association has, for example, partnered with the Ontario Chiefs of Police and the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness to advance its work on combatting the effects of media violence. The discussions with these organizations have included a focus on crime prevention and the importance of finding strategies to support young people and help them avoid becoming either the perpetrators or the victims of violence.

I will stop here and share this presentation with a colleague who has direct expertise in this area - John Muise, Director of Public Safety at the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness.

A particularly reputable and evidence-based model of community partnership specifically aimed at prevention of youth violence is the Street Crime Unit that has operated successfully in Toronto schools in the past.

A former principal of C. W. Jefferys, the school where 15-year-old Jordan Manners was fatally shot last year, told the School Community Safety Panel that the relationship between officers at 31 Division and C. W. Jefferys had changed during her tenure at the school (2000 - 2006). The principal, Ms. Kojima, explained that for many years non-uniformed Street Crime officers would regularly drop by the school in a non-enforcement capacity, but that in her last year as principal (2005-2006) the police presence was limited. Ms Kojima 'mourned the loss of the relationship' C. W. Jefferys once had with the police."

The final report of the School Community Safety Panel documented in some detail the attitudes of students in both C.W. Jefferys and Westview Centennial towards the police in 2007. The surveys conducted revealed that fewer than 20% of students were likely to report incidents of victimization to the police. (This contrasts with a 2000 Survey of Toronto District School Board students that showed that 50% of students would report incidents to the police or another authority figure.) The reasons given by students for not talking to the police ranged from "I can take care of it myself" to "Police can't do anything/waste of time" to "Police can't protect me." While these responses speak to a serious issue of trust between young people and the police, **not one of the 126 recommendations made by the School Community Safety Panel focused on the need to build better relations among schools, students and the police.** This is, in my view, a significant flaw in that report.

Many people tend to view the police solely as a law enforcement presence. The very thought of uniformed officers in schools is worrisome to them. However, the contemporary community-based policing model is about much more than enforcement. It puts officers in closer contact with the public they serve and opens the door for a relationship with young people. A relationship that is supportive rather than confrontational. Committed, specially trained officers working day in and day out with school administrators, teachers and students, allows for both intervention and prevention.

I can personally attest to the effectiveness of the Street Crime Unit model. I was one of the founding members between 1989 and 1995 supervising officers assigned to schools in the east end of the city. I think it is regrettable that, instead of expanding Street Crime Units across Metropolitan Toronto, the Police Services Board of the day made a political decision to move to a different model of community policing.

I know the Street Crime Unit model had an immediate effect in lowering not only the level of violence in the schools but in the surrounding community.

Individual officers were partnered with a handful of schools connected by pagers and cell phones. They were in the schools, often on a daily basis, to solve problems, communicate with students, staff and parents. Their role was to prevent crime and violence not just to investigate occurrences. Working with school staff, decisions were made collaboratively. When it became necessary, arrests were made and charges laid in a timely fashion. Ongoing

follow-up and information-sharing was the norm. The objective was a school and community where students felt safe. This can only be achieved with long-term continuity. Because we had the same officer(s) throughout the year show up and take ownership, the results were lasting and profound. Relationships were forged between staff, police and students.

At the same time that Ms. Kojima “mourned” the loss of the police relationship in her school, I note that students in the C.W. Jefferys victimization survey did not see the police as a viable solution. In fact, only 40 percent believed the police should be called even when a student is caught with a weapon in school. In the beginning, we in the Street Crime Unit met with the same attitude. Many students, staff and parents were not interested in having an officer associated with their school. However, after just a few months there was a complete turnaround. Students not only felt safer, but in addition they recommended **an increased police presence in their schools**, including the addition of a female officer. Clearly, we had forged a relationship of trust and partnership.

The model of collaboration I am talking about is well documented in a research report titled “*The Anti-Violence Community School: A Police/School Partnership Model.*” The authors capture the struggle and sincere efforts of caring professionals to find a way to work together to address youth violence. This is a thought-provoking research paper that speaks to the issues raised in the Safety Panel's interim report.

One of the authors, Fred Mathews, is a psychologist and Director of Research and Youth Justice Programs at Central Toronto Youth Services. Dr. Mathews has received numerous awards for his contributions to at-risk communities. In short, he is an expert.

The Street Crime Unit has been referred to as a “Cadillac” model of policing. It doesn't come without a cost. We recognize that the current police funding “envelope” has little or no room for this kind of expenditure. If the panel chooses to consider this model as one of its recommendations, we would suggest that you also recommend new (provincial) or shared (city/school board/province) sources of funding.

When we met with the School Community Safety Advisory Panel we urged them to consider the Street Crime model when making recommendations in their final report.

As has already been said, they did not make any recommendations that deviated from the perception of the police as a law enforcement body only. We would like the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence to examine the model we have described and conclude that it has immense value for at-risk youth.

We are heartened by the current intense focus on making our schools and communities safe. We believe that the solutions are broad-ranging and that we all – schools, educators, communities, parents, students, social agencies, every level of government – have a responsibility to take on and a contribution to make. Working together, we can reduce and prevent violence, we can give young people positive choices, we can strengthen safety in our schools, and we can improve the quality of life for all our communities.