



# TDSB School Safety Review

Public Report

May 2024



## Background

In light of the recent tragic, violent incidents at its schools, Legal Services for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB, the Board) retained two firms in January 2023 to perform school safety reviews at Woburn C.I., Birchmount Park C.I., Victoria Park C.I., and David and Mary Thomson C.I.

Turner Consulting Group conducted an analysis of school safety through the lens of school climate and equity. This supported an understanding of social conditions that have given rise to the increase in violence and near misses in these schools and to identify what can be done to foster a more positive school climate and prevent further violence.

This report includes public findings and recommendations arising from our analysis. This report does not identify issues specific to each of the four schools. Instead, it highlights the issues that were identified as having an impact on the schools collectively. We recognize that these issues are not equally applicable to each school and that there are marked differences between the four schools. These findings and recommendations may be used to improve school climate and safety at other schools throughout the TDSB.

## How We Conceptualize School Safety

While the violent incidents that took place within the schools have outside sources and influences, there are also in-school factors that significantly impact whether students will engage in inappropriate behaviours or commit acts of violence, whether students will tell an adult in the building when inappropriate behaviours have occurred or are expected to occur, whether students feel a sense of belonging in the school and how students resolve conflict with their peers. Researchers have identified key factors that offer schools protection from inappropriate or violent behaviours, including the following:

- Support by, and relationships with, caring adults in the building
- Perception of fair policies and fair treatment
- School administrator and staff cultural competency

- High expectations for all students
- Student engagement, and
- Diversity of school administrators and staff.

## What We Did

School administrators and school staff from the four TDSB secondary schools were invited to participate in interviews and focus groups conducted between January and March 2023.

We also reviewed TDSB documents related to safe and caring schools, reviewed the research literature, and made one site visit to each of the four schools.

## What We Found

A crucial factor contributing to school safety is having a full complement of staff who reflect the diversity of the student population and have demonstrated equity competencies. We found that these four schools were struggling to fill positions, both temporarily and permanently. The lack of a consistent cohort of caring adults in the building impacts student engagement, school connectedness, and the ability of students to form relationships with caring adults.

In addition to finding a notable gap between the racial diversity of school leaders/staff and the diversity of the student population, we found that school leaders/staff lacked a good understanding of the issues students are facing and how these issues may contribute to inappropriate behaviours and acts of violence. Most notable was their lack of understanding of how the school system marginalizes and underserves students. Coupled with their lack of knowledge and understanding was a lack of understanding of and comfort with discussing issues of equity, particularly racial equity. This in turn limits the capacity of school leaders and staff to effectively lead and teach in schools with large populations of racialized students.

The pandemic and school closures have also had a significant impact on students. With the return to in-person learning, staff have seen an increase in the number of students experiencing mental health issues, a lack of maturity resulting from the lack of socialization, and the challenges interacting with their peers and resolving conflict—all of which contribute to school climate and safety.

## Recommendations to Improve School Climate and Safety

What happens in schools is impacted by events and relationships in the broader community, the home life of students, and students' access to social supports. What happens in schools is also affected by the adults in the building, the school climate fostered by the adults, and the attention the adults give to issues of equity. A positive school climate grows out of the relationships between students and staff, how connected students feel to their school, and the availability of in-school resources to support students' academic achievement and well-being. These same factors also help to keep students engaged in their learning and in the school community, and therefore less likely to commit or be victims of violence.

We acknowledge that addressing school safety is complex and challenging and that there is good work already being done by system leaders, school leaders, and staff. This work is not documented here.

Based on our findings, the following recommendations have been made to increase school safety. While these recommendations will not solve the problem of violence in TDSB schools, we hope that they will address the key challenges faced and significantly increase the protective factors and reduce the risk factors associated with school safety.

The following recommendations are made to address identified issues:

### **Human Resources**

**Recommendation 1:** It is recommended that the TDSB improve the recruitment and onboarding process by:

- Ensuring that the TDSB is able to quickly fill job vacancies
- Reducing the time between when a hiring decision is made and when the employee begins their new role

**Recommendation 2:** It is recommended that the TDSB increase its focus on the hiring and advancement of Indigenous, Black, and racialized teachers, including:

- Prioritizing the hiring of Indigenous, Black, and racialized teachers, School Based Safety Monitors, and other school-based staff to create a workforce that better reflects the diversity of the student population

- Ensuring that barriers are not embedded within the recruitment and selection process
- Supporting the development and advancement of Indigenous, Black, and racialized teachers into leadership positions and that they be provided with appropriate supports once in these roles
- Prioritizing the placement of Indigenous, Black, and racialized school administrators into schools with a large proportion of Indigenous, Black, and racialized students
- Indigenous, Black, and racialized school administrators be given the opportunity to share their experiences in the workplace, and that strategies be put in place to address the identified issues.

**Recommendation 3:** It is recommended that the TDSB improve access to mental health supports for students by:

- Continuing to advocate with the Ministry of Education for ongoing mental health supports and the hiring of non-instructional staff critically needed in schools
- Exploring community-based mental health resources, programs, and extracurricular activities and connecting students with these supports.

### ***Additional learning, development, and supports for school staff and leaders***

**Recommendation 4:** It is recommended that ongoing professional learning and resources be provided to school administrators and staff to:

- Increase their equity and racial literacy (i.e., the knowledge, skills, awareness, and disposition needed to talk about and address issues of race, racism, and equity)
- Educate them about the impact of the pandemic on children and youth, particularly on their socialization and mental health, and how that may in turn influence the skills and techniques school leaders and staff use to engage with, interact with, and support students
- Help them understand their role in contributing to school climate and safety
- Support them to design learning activities that are more engaging and that integrate the use of technology for learning purposes.

**Recommendation 5:** It is recommended that school administrators receive ongoing supports to address the safety challenges they experience, including:

- Documenting and sharing effective practices implemented within TDSB schools

- Convening regular meetings to allow school administrators to share their knowledge of and experience with school safety and fostering a positive school climate.

**Recommendation 6:** It is recommended that the Board and schools increase collaborations with community partners, including:

- Working collaboratively with community partners, including the City of Toronto, the Government of Ontario, and community and faith organizations, among others, to address child and youth well-being in the city of Toronto
- Connecting with local places of worship, community organizations, and businesses to understand the programs and services available to support students
- Engaging with community organizations focused on gang intervention work to develop programs that address the needs of students who are gang involved.

### ***Programs and supports for students***

**Recommendation 7:** It is recommended that programming be offered to students to support their mental health and school engagement, including:

- Programs designed to increase empathy. (This could be accomplished using various programs, such as the programs delivered by Roots of Empathy or through the lessons and culture developed in class around social-emotional learning.)
- Programs, supports, and extracurricular activities that are of interest to students from diverse backgrounds to help them develop their social skills and conflict resolution skills
- Lessons to increase their social media literacy
- Extracurricular activities and co-op programs, particularly those that engage the most marginalized students, in order to give students a sense of belonging and opportunities to earn money
- Interventions to identify and close learning gaps for students at the elementary school level so that students are able to enter secondary school with confidence and readiness to fully engage in their classes
- Interventions be put in place for students who have learning gaps and are not attending class. Alternative schooling options should also be identified for students who might do better in another learning environment.

**Recommendation 8:** It is recommended that the TDSB consider establishing schools as community hubs so that students and families can access community agencies, health care, and other services in their neighbourhoods.

**Recommendation 9:** It is recommended that the TDSB focus on restorative practice to keep students engaged in their schooling and to reduce the number of school days missed.

**Recommendation 10:** It is recommended that the experiences of students who attend school but don't attend class be explored, including by better understanding the extent of the issue and the reasons why students are not attending class, in order to develop strategies to address the issues students are facing.

**Recommendation 11:** It is recommended that schools engage in campaigns to build a positive school identity and increase school spirit, which may help to lessen how neighbourhood rivalries play out within schools.

**Recommendation 12:** It is recommended that student suspensions and expulsions be tracked by school and by race, gender, religion, and other characteristics on a monthly basis and that interventions and supports be provided for school administrators whose schools have a high number of suspensions and expulsions.