



OUR CHILDREN, OUR SCHOOLS

The release of the Falconer report on school safety, accompanied by 126 recommendations, has opened up a wide-ranging public discussion about violence and the 'culture of fear' in many of Toronto's schools. It is a disturbing document, but at its core the report is a confirmation of what community and social justice activists have been warning about for the last dozen years.

We have always said that there will be real and lasting consequences to the eight years of the Mike Harris Common Sense Revolution. Starting with the amalgamation of Metro Toronto's school boards, and the introduction of the now-infamous education funding formula, the provincial Conservative government deliberately reduced the resources available in the Toronto system and imposed a disastrous "Safe Schools" culture that pushed thousands of young people out of school and into the streets.

The funding formula brought severe cutbacks to virtually every aspect of public education in Toronto. There was no place for the systematic allocation of additional resources to serve complex-needs youth. Every student got the same downsized, inadequate package of educational services. Every student faced the same inflexible 'zero tolerance' policy. The key finding of the Report is that **"marginalized youth cannot be punished/suspended into being engaged"**.

The reality of our schools reflects the dramatic shifts that have been taking place in the social, linguistic and cultural composition of Toronto's student population. As dozens of reports have concluded, there are long-term trends toward greater social inequality, widening income gaps, and racialization of poverty.

As long as government policies fail to effectively address growing social inequality, as long as supports from welfare to community recreation centres to language and job training remain inadequate, an ever-growing number of complex-needs children and youth will walk through the doors of our public schools. **Relying on public education as the social service of last resort has already failed many of these children and it will inevitably undermine the future viability of the whole public education system.**

The Falconer Report clearly makes the point that a school does not exist as an island in any community. But it clearly points to the political and a budgetary crisis created by the Conservatives. By reducing Trustees to a part-time position, they shifted control to the senior staff of the TDSB, who were legally obliged to take their direction from the Provincial Ministry of Education.

Labour and community activists built the *Need to Succeed Campaign* to challenge the budget cuts, and a majority of Trustees refused to vote for a flawed budget. As a result, the province formally installed Supervisor Paul Christie, locking out the Trustees and imposing budget cuts against the will of Trustees, staff, teachers, support staff and parent organizations.

These upheavals in the TDSB sent a massive 'chill' right through the public school system. It is hard not to connect the dots from the 'culture of silence' that Julian Falconer has blamed for the current failure to confront violence in our schools to the culture of silence imposed by Supervisor Paul Christie and former Director of Education David Reid on staff, principals and teachers.

Outside the school walls other cutbacks were taking their toll – community services, welfare rates, transit service, and even access to public space. More parents were juggling poverty-wage jobs instead of spending time with their kids. A dramatic increase in complex-needs student population coincided with drastically declining capacity to meet diverse educational needs. Simultaneously the TDSB, one of the largest school boards in North America, suffered a series of disabling blows that in many respects resulted in a kind of institutional paralysis. **At the time when strong leadership was most necessary, the TDSB – as an institution, not as a collection of individuals – was simply incapable of taking the necessary initiative.**

Bringing about a genuine sea change in the culture of Toronto's schools will only occur if the Federal and Provincial governments undertake concerted policy initiatives. The death of Jordan Manners and the Falconer report are further evidence that Toronto urgently needs a re-developed social infrastructure to begin to deal with the enormous challenges of social inequality. The alternative is to consign Toronto to a future of social polarization, cultural ghettoization and violence.

The Provincial government must take direct responsibility for the disaster of under-funding, commit to systematic increases across the whole system, and provide additional 'surge' funding to meet the educational challenge posed by the complex-needs student population. There must be a long-term commitment to fair funding, so that caring adults are actually in place to support young people.

The Board itself needs to focus its priorities. Two years ago the Labour Council and its Equity in Education Working Group brought forward an eight point plan to rebuild the capacity for a true equity agenda at the TDSB – including hiring child and youth workers. The plan was supported by our education affiliates and many trustees, but hit the brick wall of the 2006 budget. Some elements of support found their way into the inner-city/model schools program, but the TDSB has failed to commit to the needed resources to meet its profound equity needs.

While there are some of the recommendations from the report that we would not necessarily endorse, it is a vitally important document. It makes the clear connection between what is happening in our neighbourhoods and in our classrooms, and reiterates the need to invest in order for our students to succeed. Bringing to light safety issues for teachers and support staff is long overdue. The exposure of the degree of violence against girls and young women – which is described as a pervasive problem in TDSB schools - requires a deep and thoughtful response.

The Falconer Report on School Safety deserves our support, and we need to build a campaign to apply meaningful pressure to Queen's Park and the TDSB to implement it. Our schools do need to be community hubs that are welcoming and accessible. Labour and community activists will continue to fight for quality, publicly funded education as the foundation for a just and caring society. And we will continue to struggle against the poverty, racism and inequality which feeds so much of the anger and violence that we see around us. **Our goal – inside and outside the classroom – is to ensure that every one of our students are in an environment in which they can succeed.**