

Chapter 4

Section 4.11

Ministry of Education

School Safety

Follow-up to VFM Section 3.11, 2010 Annual Report

Background

A learning environment that is not physically and psychologically safe can adversely affect not only a student's safety but also his or her motivation to learn. The impact of bullying, for example, can be severe: victims may have to deal with such issues as social anxiety, loneliness, physical ailments, low self-esteem, absenteeism, diminished academic performance, depression and, in extreme cases, thoughts of suicide. A 2009 survey of Ontario students in Grades 7 through 12 by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health identified that almost one in three students has been bullied at school and approximately one-quarter of students have bullied others at school.

Our audit in 2010 focused on the adequacy of activities undertaken by the Ministry of Education (Ministry) and selected school boards (Durham District School Board, Sudbury Catholic District School Board and Toronto District School Board) to improve the safety of Ontario schools. Our work indicated that a number of initiatives had been taken to address safety issues in Ontario's schools. These initiatives included new legislation, teacher training and targeted school safety funding. However, neither the Ministry nor the three school boards or various schools we visited were collecting sufficient information on whether these initiatives were having an impact on student behaviour. We

concluded that better information on the success of its initiatives would help the Ministry to allocate funding to the areas of greatest need. Some of our other key observations were as follows:

- The Ministry allocated \$34 million—about two-thirds of its total annual school safety funding—to two initiatives focused on assisting suspended, expelled, and other high-risk students. Most of this funding was allocated based on total board enrolment rather than on more targeted factors such as the actual number of students needing assistance.
- The percentage of students that had been suspended in each board ranged from 1% to more than 11% of the student population, which may explain why some boards underutilized their funding by as much as 70%. A comparison of provincial and school board data on suspension rates to a recent anonymous provincial survey of students suggests, however, that school administrators were not aware of the extent of serious safety issues in some schools, such as the incidence of students being threatened or injured with a weapon. Most senior safety staff at the school boards we visited, as well as administrators at the schools we visited, said that the discrepancy was due to a lack of reporting by students, possibly because of fear of reprisals, and that more needed to be done to facilitate student reporting of incidents.

- The Ministry had established requirements for school boards and schools pertaining to the application of escalating discipline for students who had repeatedly violated school safety policies. Despite significant differences in suspension rates among boards and among schools we visited, neither the Ministry nor the boards we visited had formally analyzed the differences in suspension rates to assess whether progressive discipline policies were being applied consistently by Ontario's 72 publicly funded school boards.
- An evaluation of a program that stations police officers in schools identified an improvement in relationships between students and police. The majority of school administrators we interviewed indicated that having an officer in the school improved school safety and that expansion of such programs should be considered.

We made a number of recommendations for improvement and received commitments from the Ministry and the school boards that they would take action to address our concerns.

Status of Actions Taken on Recommendations

According to information received from the Ministry and each of the three school boards we visited during the audit, progress has been made on implementing all of the recommendations in our *2010 Annual Report*, with substantial progress made on several. For example, the Ministry now monitors specific program funding through progress reports received from boards and by analyzing data to assess activities and how funds were spent to support school safety initiatives. In addition, as part of the initial investigation into the variations in suspension rates within boards and across the province, the Ministry held eight regional data sessions

across the province for Ontario's publicly funded boards in March 2011 and again in spring 2012. These regional sessions focused on strategies for maintaining consistency in enforcing suspensions and expulsions, sharing best practices, and dealing with the challenges in designing and implementing school safety programs. Also of significance is the passing of the *Accepting Schools Act, 2012* in June 2012. This Act encourages stronger actions to create a safe and inclusive environment in all schools.

The status of actions taken on each of our recommendations is described in the following sections.

SCHOOL SAFETY INITIATIVES

Recommendation 1

To ensure that school safety funding is used effectively to achieve program goals to improve school safety, the Ministry of Education and, where appropriate, school boards should:

- *reconsider the appropriateness of allocating, on the basis of enrolment, the majority of school safety funding primarily to assist suspended, expelled, and other high-risk students, given that the ratio of such students to total enrolment may vary significantly among school boards;*
- *for other specific program funding, ensure that the funds are allocated based on identified needs and follow up to verify that the funds provided are being spent for the intended purpose; and*
- *obtain and share information on the success of initiatives such as Student Support Leadership and police officer placements in schools, and determine whether a more significant coordinating role for the Ministry is appropriate to enhance their effectiveness.*

Status

While the main focus of school safety funding has been to provide supports for students who have been expelled or given long-term suspensions, funds can be used for a variety of programs, including those to support at-risk students who exhibit behaviours that might lead to suspension or expulsion. The

Ministry noted that it continues to work with boards and its other partners to identify student needs and fund specific initiatives to address those needs. The three boards we visited in 2010 informed us that ministry funding was allocated to each school based on factors such as the overall board strategy, board-supported initiatives and individual school needs. However, the Ministry acknowledged that more consistent, reliable information is required to ensure that funds are appropriately allocated on the basis of student needs. In this regard, the Ministry has been engaged in extensive activities designed to enhance the quality of student information.

The Ministry requires detailed reporting on all safe schools initiatives on an ongoing basis that outlines, in addition to financial information, program activities and outcomes. It monitors specific program funding through progress reports received from boards and by analyzing data to assess program activities and how funds were spent to support school safety initiatives. The Ministry is examining the possibility of conducting spot audits to further ensure that the funds provided for these initiatives are spent for the purposes intended.

The Ministry supports partnerships between school boards and other community groups through its Student Support Leadership Initiative. This initiative helps clusters of school boards and community agencies provide supports outside the classroom that promote positive student behaviour. Focusing on the prevention of at-risk behaviours in 2011/12, the clusters invited leaders of municipal services that offer services for children and youth, such as parks and recreation and public health, to participate. These clusters submitted mid-year reports noting their accomplishments and will submit final reports in fall 2012. Clusters are also completing a self-evaluation of their 2011/12 activities that will help them to continue with their activities once the financial support from the Student Support Leadership Initiative comes to an end.

Since 2010, the Ministry has gathered and shared information on the success of school safety initiatives through a variety of other means, such as:

- hosting the Urban and Priority High Schools Symposium for participating schools to share information on leading practices and challenges (the Ministry intends to produce an annual newsletter related to this symposium);
- developing and distributing *Promoting a Positive School Climate*, which provides an evidence-based list of practical ideas for Safe Schools Teams to consider in their efforts to develop and maintain a positive climate for students; and
- establishing a safe schools working group that now holds regular teleconferences.

The Ministry also worked with the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services and police services partners to negotiate and release a revised *Provincial Model of the Police/School Board Protocol* in January 2011. The Ministry has helped boards form partnerships with police services by providing one-time funding for joint training on the revised protocol. In addition, the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services provided \$1.68 million for a Safe Schools Grants program intended to:

- encourage police services, local schools and boards to collaborate on various activities;
- create teams of police, educators, counsellors, health-care professionals, parents and students that will work together to help reduce violence and bullying; and
- help police officers become more active and engaged in school-related activities.

The boards we visited during our 2010 audit provided further detail on their delivery of the Student Support Leadership and other initiatives to encourage continued sharing and implementation of best practices. One board noted that, to encourage the sharing of best practices across cluster members, a number of committees were established that met regularly throughout the school year, including a collaborative practices committee and a committee to plan and hold partnership symposiums. Another board noted that it provided release time for its Safe Schools Teams to meet

and analyze surveys to identify and address issues of concern. The third board initiated a Positive Space campaign where each school is to provide a designated room or private area within the school where students can speak freely to an adult representative. By June 2012, one representative from each school was to be trained as a Positive Space representative.

MONITORING COMPLIANCE WITH SCHOOL SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

Recommendation 2

To promote compliance with all school safety legislation and policies designed to provide a safe learning environment for Ontario students, the Ministry of Education should work with school boards to:

- *monitor compliance with required school safety legislation and ministry policies;*
- *ensure that schools have functioning Safe School Teams in place that include representation from all required groups;*
- *investigate significant differences in suspension rates between school boards and schools to assess whether such differences are reasonable and to determine whether additional student disciplinary guidance is necessary to ensure a reasonable level of consistency across the province; and*
- *assess whether requiring periodic updates to criminal background checks for school staff, service providers, and volunteers would enhance the safety of students in Ontario's schools.*

Status

The Ministry informed us that it promotes compliance with school safety legislation, policies and initiatives in a variety of ways, including ongoing discussions with school boards on reporting, monitoring and data-based decision-making. With ongoing dialogue and requirements to report on specific initiatives, the Ministry expects that boards will continue to improve their practices over time. The Ministry monitors compliance by analyzing

data to assess board activities and how funds were spent to support school safety.

In the 2010/11 school year, the Ministry began distributing \$5 million annually to fund a regionally based school board audit function to help ensure compliance with school safety legislation, policies and initiatives. As of January 31, 2011, audit committees had been established in all boards. The Ministry developed a risk assessment tool, and eight regional internal audit teams were expected to complete a risk assessment using this tool by the end of the 2011/12 school year. As of April 2012, some teams had already completed their risk assessment. All school boards were expected to have internal audits performed in the 2011/12 school year, some of which could have been audits of school safety initiatives if the region's risk assessment determined this area to be a priority.

A memo was sent to all Directors of Education in October 2010 reminding boards of the requirement to have a functioning Safe Schools Team in place with appropriate membership, including the school principal and at least one student, parent, teacher, non-teaching staff member and community partner. In November 2010, the Ministry created the Premier's Safe Schools Awards in order to increase the profile of these teams. For the 2010/11 school year, 10 schools were recognized for the exceptional and innovative work they were doing to create a safe and caring environment. The Ministry is developing various ways to showcase Safe Schools Teams that have received a Premier's Award, highlighting their accomplishments and best practices. Also, the Ministry noted that, through a safe schools working group teleconference in June 2011, boards shared a number of best practices. One of these practices is to require schools to report team membership to the school board, to help ensure the establishment and proper composition of Safe Schools Teams.

One board reported that it has added a requirement that an equity representative be added to every Safe Schools Team to help eliminate biases and barriers that may be related to gender, race, religion, socio-economic background and other factors. For

accountability reasons, the schools report the name of the team chair to the board. Also, this board advised us that it provides training for Safe Schools Teams on topics such as creating a positive school climate, its protocol for police–school board partnerships and the use of data to help develop a safety and bullying prevention plan.

In 2011, the Ministry completed an in-depth analysis of school board data by examining suspension and expulsion rates by school and by board and including such student attributes as gender, infraction type, length of suspension and the number of repeat suspensions. The Ministry found, for example, that boys were three times more likely to be suspended than girls and more than 80% of suspensions were coded as “other,” which includes such dissimilar violations as fighting, being under the influence of drugs, committing uniform infractions and being late for school.

As part of the initial analysis of the variations in suspension rates within boards and across the province, the Ministry invited each publicly funded board to one of eight regional data sessions held across the province in March 2011. In-depth analysis of suspension and expulsion data continues and subsequent regional sessions were held in spring 2012. The goals of these sessions, which the Ministry intends to hold annually, were to work toward a more consistent application of legislation, regulations and policies in schools and boards and, over time, reduce the differences in suspension and expulsion rates for students with similar types of inappropriate behaviour.

Discussions at the regional sessions focused on strategies for sharing best practices and dealing with the challenges in designing and implementing programs for suspended and expelled students, and on strategies for generating and maintaining consistency among school staff in enforcing disciplinary procedures. For example, one board noted that it collects suspension rates by school, by area and for the whole board mid-year and at the end of the school year. This data is then provided to

area superintendants and school principals, and, in camera, to board trustees, for monitoring and decision-making purposes.

A regulation under the *Education Act* requires school boards to collect criminal background checks for all employees and, with the exception of school bus drivers, for service providers who have direct and regular contact with students. School bus drivers do require criminal background checks, however, under the *Highway Traffic Act*. The Ministry of Transportation is expected to remove the licensing requirement for school bus drivers to obtain criminal background checks under the *Highway Traffic Act* effective July 2013. Before that time, the Ministry of Education plans to amend its regulation under the *Education Act* to remove the exemption of school bus drivers from obtaining criminal background checks. In addition to the requirements under the regulations, one board noted that it now requires criminal background checks for all volunteers, with an annual declaration and an updated criminal background check at least every five years. Another board advised us that it was in consultation with its local police force to determine if ongoing updating would enhance safety for students.

MEASURING AND REPORTING ON SCHOOL SAFETY

Recommendation 3

To help in its efforts to ensure that students are educated in a safe environment, the Ministry of Education should work with school boards to:

- *develop measurable objectives and related performance indicators for activities intended to improve school safety, and periodically measure progress in achieving these objectives;*
- *capture data on incidents of inappropriate student behaviour and complaints received, in addition to the information currently collected on suspensions and expulsions, to support the assessment of existing initiatives and identify areas on which to focus future efforts;*

- *conduct school safety surveys to gauge the progress achieved in improving school safety at the provincial and school board levels; and*
- *review existing best practices in Ontario and elsewhere that have been found to be effective in encouraging students to report serious school safety incidents.*

Status

The Ministry engaged a consultant to develop an evaluation framework of indicators for its Safe Schools Strategy. The consultant's February 2011 report to the Ministry included proposed performance indicators and data collection strategies. The model aims to establish interim accomplishments that can indicate whether a program is making progress in the desired direction, given that the ultimate goal is likely to take many years to accomplish. The consultant based the proposed performance indicators on research that included current practices in Ontario and other national and international jurisdictions, as well as best practices in performance measurement.

The Ministry stated that it is committed to implementing a comprehensive evaluation framework to measure the effectiveness of safe schools policies and programs, which would include indicators of students' and parents' perceptions of school safety. To obtain the data to assess these perceptions, the Ministry plans to engage an outside agency to collect and analyze school survey data, starting in the 2012/13 school year, on students' and parents' perceptions of school safety.

The Ministry noted that collecting and analyzing aggregate data at the provincial level helps it to make legislative, policy and program decisions. The Ministry also noted that data collected at the board and school level helps boards and schools make local decisions on programs and implementation strategies that best suit their specific communities. In this regard, the Ministry informed us that it made amendments to its OnSIS database to capture more data from schools on student participation in programs for suspended and expelled students.

Also, in May 2011, the Ministry informed boards that they would be required to report data on violent incidents to the Ministry beginning in the 2011/12 school year. The collection of data on student participation in these programs and on incidents will form the basis for the measurement of some of the proposed performance indicators for the Safe Schools Strategy.

In November 2010, the Ministry spent \$3.1 million to develop and distribute resource guides to promote a positive school climate. Receipt of this funding was contingent upon the school's having undertaken a survey to assess whether the climate in the school is inclusive and accepting of all pupils, including pupils of any race, gender, creed, sexual orientation or disability.

All three boards reported on the use of school surveys. One board noted that a pilot survey was given to a number of schools in the spring of 2011 and then extended to all of its schools in the fall. The boards noted that the surveys were used for multiple purposes, such as to identify areas of concern that needed to be addressed, to support the development of safety and bullying prevention plans and to assist in the understanding of the school climate in order to improve program planning at the school level.

The Ministry was also involved in the development of legislation that requires board multi-year plans to include goals that promote a positive school climate and bullying prevention. The legislation also requires each board to establish a bullying prevention plan that will include procedures for reporting the incidence of bullying and the range of disciplinary actions a principal may take against a student involved in bullying. The legislation also establishes strategies for protecting a person who witnesses an act of bullying, reports bullying or provides information during a bullying investigation. This legislation, the *Accepting Schools Act, 2012*, which amended the *Education Act*, received royal assent in June 2012.

SCHOOL SAFETY TRAINING

Recommendation 4

To build on the steps taken to date to ensure that school staff are adequately trained to deal with school safety issues, the Ministry of Education should work with school boards to assess whether school safety training delegated to schools is of sufficient depth to meet the needs of school staff.

Status

The Ministry informed us that, in consultation with school boards, it continues to build on the training that it has provided over the last several years with respect to safe and inclusive schools. The Ministry also noted that it is working closely with boards to meet the needs that boards identify in the areas of training and staff development.

The Ministry continues to share, and create opportunities to share, best practices on how to train staff on an ongoing basis. For example, at the regional sessions it was noted that e-learning

and the analysis of various scenarios are effective methods of training staff within boards and schools. In May 2011, the Ministry also funded Toronto Police Services to produce a training video on the revised police–school board protocol and provided funding for joint training of school board and police services staff.

All three boards we visited during our audit advised us that they had systems in place to track and provide professional development opportunities for board and school staff. One board developed a central tracking tool that staff use to register for professional learning opportunities found within the board. A second board noted that it provides its schools with consistent school safety training packages related to various initiatives. The third board noted that it provides ongoing training and resources to the Safe Schools Teams in order to support the planning that is being done with school climate surveys to extend the development of a positive climate within its schools.