

Time for a measured response to Falconer

Now that we've lived through the initial reaction to the Falconer report, it's time to take a more measured look at the reality of what goes on in our schools and at what needs to happen to make our schools live up to their potential.

First, we must remember that schools exist within a societal context, in which the growing gap between rich and poor, and cuts to social assistance, recreation programs, public housing and other social services, have had a major impact. We must also remember that there are wide variations among schools, and that data from only two of Toronto's schools does not necessarily paint a complete picture.

An extensive survey conducted last year of over 100,000 Toronto students in Grades 7-12, found that 89% of high school students said they felt safe inside the school and 69% felt safe on school property. Eighty-one per cent said they got along well with other students in their school and 60% thought their schools were welcoming and friendly places.

If we react only to the more sensational components of the report in isolation, we may miss a chance to look at the bigger picture. Sniffer spaniels, name tags for students and more security in schools will do nothing to address the broader issues.

We know from years of research that there are kids who are destined to struggle in school through no fault of their own, but simply because of their family circumstances. We also know that a high ratio of supportive adults increases those students' chances for success in school.

So first, let's move quickly to ensure that what is currently called the *Learning Opportunities Grant* – intended to fund programs for students at risk because of their socio-economic circumstances – has enough money in it to pay for extra staff, and that the money is used as intended. Let's rename it the *Equity in Education Grant*, and let's commit to providing all students with an equitable chance for success – as our publicly-funded schools are supposed to.

Second, we should look at the so-called “culture of silence” in our schools. The media coverage and the report gave the impression that there was a Sopranos-like atmosphere in schools. The truth is more complicated.

The code of silence among students we understand. Young people are, for the most part, unwilling to betray their fellow students – some because they're afraid, and some because it's a part of the culture of youth. Falconer is right to talk about providing ways for kids to talk about what's going on, and even to turn in other students who have committed offences.

The code of silence among administrators and teachers is different, and more complex.

There is currently a lot of pressure on staff in schools – to implement policy changes, get students' test scores up, make limited funding work for all students, supervise schoolyards and halls, manage the administrative work that was downloaded from school boards, provide students with a range of programs, keep schools open, etc. The culture of silence

that Mr. Falconer described may stem at least in part from a lack of balance in our schools, between the pressure on staff and the need for breathing room to provide space and time for innovation, for mentoring, and to find solutions to real, and ongoing problems.

Our collective reaction to the report raises many questions: Do we have expectations of our schools that don't match the realities of the communities within which they exist? How can we ensure our schools are safe, welcoming places where everyone feels they belong? Will dogs, name tags and intercom systems do the trick? Or would it be more effective to focus on making stronger more integrated links between schools and the other parts of students' and families lives? And, most importantly, what kinds of policies and programs do we need, and how should we target them, to ensure that we provide students with an equitable chance for success?

It is time now to make long-term plans and move beyond the early reaction to this report. We need to articulate a vision for our education system beyond test score targets. We need to provide the resources necessary to ensure that every student feels the way many do – that their schools are good places to be and that they have the same chance for success as everyone else.

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