

VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

Arar lawyer heads student safety inquiry

Recommendations to be citywide

BY ALEX DOBROTA

Jordan Manners's shooting continued to reverberate across the city yesterday, as the Toronto District School Board called an inquiry into student safety and a coalition of community groups prepared to press for more action against gun violence.

The school board appointed prominent Toronto lawyer Julian Falconer to chair an independent panel that will look at safety issues at C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute, where the 15-year-old was shot.

Mr. Falconer is known as a tenacious lawyer and a human-rights advocate, who represented victims of police abuse. He participated in such high-profile cases as the Ipperwash inquiry and acted as Maher Arar's lawyer in his civil lawsuit against the Canadian government.

The three-member panel is aiming to deliver a report by July 16. Its recommendations will be applied at all the board's schools, said the director of education Gerry Connolly.

"This is a systemic issue," Mr. Falconer said. "We face a situation where some people ... do not feel safe in the hallways of schools across the city."

Jordan was shot in the hallway of his school two weeks ago. Two young men, both 17, have been charged with first-degree murder.

The lawyer for Jordan's family, Courtney Betty, said he reserved comments on the school board's announcement for a news conference scheduled today.

Mr. Betty is expected to join a lineup of community groups that includes B'nai Brith and the Greater Toronto Area Faith Alliance that are set to denounce what they see as the inaction of the McGuinty government.

The family had asked the government to guarantee a coroner's inquest into the boy's death. They also called for the appointment of a youth commissioner. But these demands have so far fallen on deaf ears, said Don Meredith, chair of the GTA Faith Alliance.

"I think we need to look at a more broad-base type of inquiry," Mr. Meredith said. "So the forming of a youth commissioner along those lines and an inquest ... I think are



Human-rights lawyer Julian Falconer during a press conference at the Toronto District School Board yesterday.

PHILIP CHEUNG FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Julian Falconer

in order."

Mr. Falconer said the panel will not look at any matters covered by the criminal trial, such as details of the shooting itself. Rather, the panel's role is to review how the school and other authorities handled student safety at the North York school over the past two years.

Mr. Falconer said he expects to interview anyone from students to school board trustees, and he didn't rule out interviewing police officers as well.

The panel does not have the powers associated with a public commission of inquiry, a body that usually derives authority from either provincial or federal levels of government. And Mr. Falconer can't compel witnesses to testify.

Still, a law professor who followed Mr. Falconer's work closely said he expects the panel to answer thorny questions about school safety in Toronto.

"He will not walk away from the task until all the questions have been answered, [he will] leave no stone unturned," said Alan Young of Osgoode Hall.