SUBMISSION TO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY SAFETY ADVISORY PANEL

By

THE OPSBA VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA COALITION

November 30, 2007

Good afternoon. My name is Rhonda Kimberley-Young, Secretary-Treasurer of the Ontario Teachers' Federation and joining me is John Muise, Director of Public Safety for the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness. On the speakerphone is Dr. Peter Jaffe, professor at the Faculty of Education, Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children, University of Western Ontario and also a trustee with the Thames Valley District School Board.

The violent death of a young person, full of potential, is a cause for deep sadness and we express our heartfelt sympathy to the family of Jordan Manners and to the students, parents and staff of the C.W. Jefferys' school community. Sympathy has to be joined by a commitment to work for change. That is how we see the purpose of this School Community Safety Advisory Panel. It is how we see the purpose of the group we represent.

We are members of a coalition that was formed almost two years ago to take action on the role that media in all its forms plays in the acceptance of violence and desensitization to violent acts in our schools, on our streets and in society at large. While there are many educators in our group, we have operated from a shared understanding that dealing with violence is not just a school issue or a family issue or a community issue. We have, therefore, brought together people who are committed to work for change and who represent a range of sectors, including: the Ontario Public School Boards' Association; Ontario Catholic Trustees' Association; Ontario Student Trustees' Association; Ontario Teachers' Federation; Ontario Secondary School

Teachers' Federation; Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario; Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association; Ontario Teachers' Federation; Ontario Principals' Council; Ontario Federation of Home & School Associations; Ontario Provincial Police, Crime Prevention Section; and the Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness.

The broad expertise we have assembled in our group prompts us to address the Panel on two matters:

(1) Effects of violence in the media and preventative education

(2) School-Community-Police Collaboration

In your panel's Interim Report, there is a strongly worded observation: "*Our schools will only be safe and equitable if our communities are safe and equitable. In light of this reality, addressing the root causes of violence and crime must be a high priority*." We know that there is no single root cause. There are many. We also strongly believe that an examination of the impact of media violence will highlight connections to one of the root causes of violence and crime. That is why we appreciate this opportunity to talk about what we know and what we are working for.

In the days and weeks after Jordan's death, there were calls for action on so many fronts: banning handguns, tackling poverty and racism, providing community programs and accessible recreation facilities, increasing building security, engaging students more strongly in school. All of these things are needed and taking action on them is the right thing to do.

There is another area for action and that brings me to the work of our coalition. We want to take action to prevent the negative effects that violent content in media has on children, on their behavior, attitudes and view of the world. This is about education, not about censorship; it's

about providing critical skills, not limiting freedom of expression. It is about recognizing that 30 years of research show that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behaviour, particularly in children. The effects are measurable and long-lasting. It is known that prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization towards violence in real life.

This is not just my opinion. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the American Academy of Pediatrics brought this to the U.S. Congressional Public Health Summit seven years ago. In 2006, psychologists at Iowa State University released the results of the first study that uses objective physiological testing to demonstrate that exposure to violent video games increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal and aggressive behaviours, while decreasing helpful behaviours. Less than a month ago the research findings released by Dr. Dimitri Christakis of the University of Washington, Seattle indicate that preschool boys exposed to violent television, even cartoons, are more likely to become aggressive later in life.

The review of the literature points out the extensive nature of media violence in the lives of children. They can easily access violent material through many, many sources including the Internet, video games, television, movies, sports and music. “Gangsta” culture is a predominant theme of a whole genre of music and music videos. Cyber-bullying in all its forms – from Facebook insults to YouTube ambushes – have skyrocketed to become the number one non-academic problem facing classrooms. There is no question that parents and professionals who work with children and adolescents are gravely concerned about the potential harmful effects of media violence. Among the factors that link the kind of school shootings we have seen at Columbine, Dawson College and most recently in Finland, is the intense involvement the young

shooters have with violent video games and violent representations of themselves on internet sites.

When young people – children really – pick up a gun and make their way down a school corridor stalking and ultimately killing another child, what is going on inside their heads? It is tempting to draw comparisons with one of the many "first-shooter" video games too easily available to very young children still learning to distinguish fantasy from reality. The correlation isn't that simple, but can we ignore the level of desensitization our children build up in the daily bombardment of violence masquerading as entertainment?

There is a huge industry making millions from pushing increasingly sensational images of violence into our lives. The most popular entertainment for boys is video games. The fundamental theme of many of these games is violence; in over 90 percent of video games the object of the game is to kill or maim human beings – women, police officers, and people belonging to another race. The best-selling games on the market today show the most graphic violence and feature a first-person shooter perspective where the player is the killer.

I would now like to turn the presentation over to Peter Jaffe.

Researchers point to the repetitive activity in these violent games, comparing it to the training available to police and the military. The outcome is accurate shooters who practise their skills and can become desensitized to the impact of real violence. This correlation is at the centre of "*Stop Teaching our Kids to Kill: A Call to Action Against TV, Movie and Video Game Violence."* A book co-authored by Colonel David Grossman, Professor of Military Science at West Point.

That is the background to the work our Violence in the Media Coalition has undertaken.

We know that one of the most effective actions we can take to reduce aggression in schools today is to educate children about the destructive effects of violent videos, music and television programs and to help students be more informed and critical users of media.

We have had teams of writers creating lesson plans that are integrated with Ontario's curriculum from Kindergarten to Grade 12, that are easy for teachers to use and are designed to make sure our children and youth have critical skills in their consumption of media. They were developed by teachers for teachers. Parallel initiatives are planned for teacher professional development, parent education and student engagement.
These resources will be in schools across the province as early as January 2008 and they will be backed up with teacher professional development in the Spring and will have the active support of parent councils.

The focus of our Coalition is on prevention, especially early prevention. Critical literacy includes the ability to actively analyze and critique texts. When teachers teach critical literacy skills in the classroom, students learn to question more deeply and begin to look at the impact of media on themselves and the world around them. Critical literacy teaching approaches are proactive, and go beyond critical thinking to challenge students to take on social responsibility and social action.

Teachers and educators need to be aware of what is currently being marketed to children and be able to share information with parents on the impact of violent media on children's development. Children today are bombarded with an astonishing array of media. Now, more than ever before, we need to give critical media literacy an important place in every classroom. We can help reduce the many negative effects of media violence by giving teachers resources

that can be easily integrated into the curriculum, resources that take a critical literacy approach on the effects of media and ways that media distorts the reality of violence.

We know there are no quick fixes. The solutions to violence among youth have to come from many places. We believe that educators and parents together are deeply concerned about addressing the inescapable role played by media violence. Together as a society we have to face the impact of media violence in individual homes and schools and in the broader community. Solutions to the problem of media violence and its consequences rest in large part in prevention and education and working strategically to make sure that the power of media to negatively influence our young people is seen as a serious factor in the problems we all want to solve.

I would now like to turn the presentation over to John Muise.

Good afternoon. As Rhonda has told you, our coalition membership extends well beyond mainstream educators and includes organizations dedicated to crime prevention. It takes a lot of committed people from a lot of different walks of life to work together to support young people and help them avoid becoming either the perpetrators or the victims of violence.

Your panel's Interim Report makes reference to a reputable model of community partnership specifically aimed at prevention of youth violence. This model is the Street Crime Unit.

I'd like to point out an observation in the interim report by a former principal of C. W. Jefferys:

> *The issue of the school-police relationship is one of the systemic issues that the Panel will be considering....Principal Anne Kojima described the relationship between officers at 31 Division and C. W. Jefferys having changed during her tenure at the school (2000 2006). Ms. Kojima explained that for many years non-uniformed Street Crime officers would regularly drop by the school in a non-enforcement capacity, but that in her last year as principal (2005-2006) the police presence was limited. Ms Kojima 'mourned the loss of the relationship' C. W. Jefferys once had with the police." (Page 54)*

Many people tend to view the police solely as a law enforcement presence only. The very thought of uniformed officers in schools is worrisome to them.

However, the contemporary community-based policing model is about much more than enforcement. It puts officers in closer contact with the public they serve and opens the door for a relationship with young people. A relationship that is supportive rather than confrontational. Committed, specially trained officers working day in and day out with school administrators, teachers and students, allows for both intervention and prevention.

I can personally attest to the effectiveness of the Street Crime Unit model. I was one of the founding members between 1989 and 1995 supervising officers assigned to schools in the east end of the city. I think it is regrettable that, instead of expanding Street Crime Units across Metropolitan Toronto, the Police Services Board of the day made a political decision to move to a different model of community policing.

I know the Street Crime Unit model had an immediate effect in lowering not only the level of violence in the schools but in the surrounding community.

Individual officers were partnered with a handful of schools connected by pagers and cell phones. They were in the schools, often on a daily basis, to solve problems, communicate with students, staff and parents. Their role was to prevent crime and violence not just to investigate

occurrences. Working with school staff, decisions were made collaboratively. When it became necessary, arrests were made and charges laid in a timely fashion. Ongoing follow-up and information-sharing was the norm. The objective was a school and community where students felt safe. This can only be achieved with long-term continuity. Because we had the same officer(s) throughout the year show up and take ownership, the results were lasting and profound. Relationships were forged between staff, police and students.

At the same time that Ms. Kojima "mourned" the loss of the police relationship in her school, I note that students in the C.W. Jefferys victimization survey did not see the police as a viable solution. In fact, only 40 percent believed the police should be called even when a student is caught with a weapon in school. In the beginning, we in the Street Crime Unit met with the same attitude. Many students, staff and parents were not interested in having an officer associated with their school. However, after just a few months there was a complete turnaround. Students not only felt safer, but in addition they recommended **an increased police presence in their schools,** including the addition of a female officer. Clearly, we had forged a relationship of trust and partnership.

The model of collaboration I am talking about is well documented in a research report titled "*The Anti-Violence Community School: A Police/School Partnership Model."* The authors capture the struggle and sincere efforts of caring professionals to find a way to work together to address youth violence. This is a thought-provoking research paper that speaks to the issues raised in the Safety Panel's interim report.

One of the authors, Fred Mathews, is a psychologist and Director of Research and Youth Justice Programs at Central Toronto Youth Services. Dr. Mathews has received numerous awards for his contributions to at-risk communities. In short, he is an expert.

The Street Crime Unit has been referred to as a “Cadillac” model of policing. It doesn’t come without a cost. We recognize that the current police funding “envelope” has little or no room for this kind of expenditure. If the panel chooses to consider this model as one of its recommendations, we would suggest that you also recommend new (provincial) or shared (city/school board/province) sources of funding.

Our Coalition urges the School Community Safety Advisory Panel to consider the Street Crime model when making recommendations in your final report.

We are heartened by the intense focus on making our schools and communities safe that has grown out of the tragic events of last May. We believe that the solutions are broad-ranging and that we all – schools, educators, communities, parents, students, social agencies, every level of government – have a responsibility to take on and a contribution to make. We are committed to making a difference in the work we have undertaken and we thank the Panel for their time and attention.