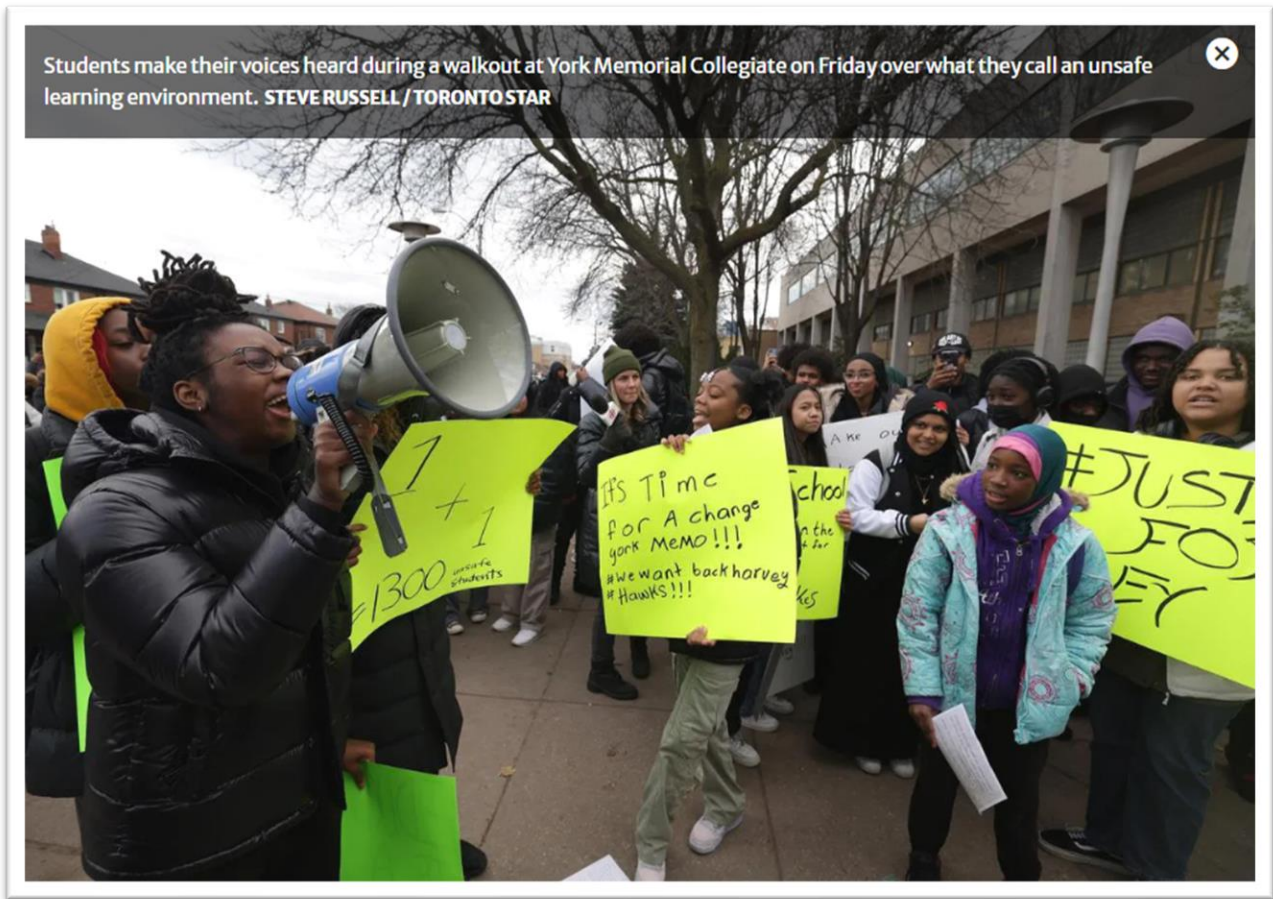


<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2022/12/02/scared-to-death-to-go-to-school-york-memorial-students-stage-mass-walkout-amid-concerns-over-violence-teacher-shortage.html>

## **‘Scared to death to go to school’: York Memorial students stage mass walkout amid concerns over violence, teacher shortage**

York Memorial students spoke of being afraid to go to school, of seeing fights and even about washrooms lacking doors, toilet paper and soap.

By [Isabel Teotonio](#) Education Reporter  
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Hundreds of teens from [York Memorial Collegiate Institute](#) staged a mass walkout on Friday to protest what they say is an unsafe learning environment, over-policing and a lack of teachers, which means some classes aren't being taught with kids sent to the library or cafeteria.

Najmo Mohammed, a Grade 11 student who has been feeling “profoundly unsafe,” finds herself longing for online learning, rather than having to physically be at school.

“Do you understand how harmful that mindset is? Wishing that I'd be anywhere but in a space that is supposed to make me feel safe.”

Some students said they had experienced racism by staff members, witnessed fights and urged teachers and administrators to learn how to de-escalate situations rather than calling the police, who they say are regularly at the school.

“We are students that need support, opportunities and a school board that actually cares,” said Khadijah Saho, a Grade 12 student. “We are asking for a safe environment that protects us physically and mentally. ... We have the right to learn.”



Students said recent media coverage of their school — incidents of escalating violence, armed police responding to a 911 call about a gun and teachers refusing to work because of facilities issues and unsafe conditions — painted youth as criminals.

Cornelious Ajibola of [For Youth Initiative](#), an organization that helped organize the walkout, which involved about 300 students, spoke of the academic impact this is having.

“Some of these students don’t even know what their grades are,” said the student and family advocate for the organization, which helps Black, racialized and newcomer youth. “Some of these students are hoping to go to

post-secondary institutions in the coming year and some of them are not even prepared for that because of what's going on in the school.”

After the walkout, students made their way to a nearby Toronto District School Board office to speak about their concerns, which even included washrooms lacking doors, toilet paper and soap dispensers.

The TDSB's director of education was in attendance and said she is listening to the students and promised to regularly meet with them.

“We think our students have solutions that we may not have thought of and that's why it's important to continue listening,” said Colleen Russell-Rawlins, adding the board has been addressing concerns.



When asked about students' comments that some have experienced racism by staff, she said “that's shocking and surprising.”

“And that's why we need to speak to students to actually understand what their experience is and then we can chart a course of action to deal with it.”



On Friday night the TDSB emailed parents and students with updates. They include announcing a permanent administrative team next week, hiring new permanent teachers, exploring virtual learning options, considering staggered exit times, making sure washrooms are fully stocked and ensuring there's a clear process to report all incidents of racism.

Meanwhile, at a Thursday night public meeting, parents said their children are frightened to go to school, and many called for a police presence at the school, which serves a predominantly racialized student population in an underserved community.

Many in the school community agree the September merger of two schools — the old George Harvey Collegiate Institute with York Memorial — has so far proven to be a disaster because it brought together 1,300 students into a building that wasn't ready to absorb them and in need of renovations.

Thursday's meeting — held on Zoom and attended by parents, teachers and community members — was organized by newly elected trustee Liban Hassan of [Ward 6 York South-Weston](#), which includes York Memorial, located on Keele Street, near Eglinton Avenue West. Also present were two senior superintendents, and the school's acting principal. Frustrated parents criticized the school's lack of communication with them, suggested temporarily moving students to online learning while issues are addressed and demanded answers to their safety and staffing concerns — in addition to a lack of teachers, there's been a revolving door of administrators.



“My son is in Grade 12 in a computer science class and he hasn’t had a teacher, or even a substitute teacher, for two weeks,” said one father. “So his class is not even happening.”

The mother of a Grade 9 student, who had been learning remotely since the pandemic’s start and this year resumed in-person learning, said her daughter is “scared to death to go to school. What am I supposed to do? Put her back online?”

Another father said “we’re beyond the hall monitors,” calling for immediate action in the form of police patrols and warned, “God forbid, if anything happens to my son at your school there are a lot of people who are going to be personally accountable.”

But others objected to the idea, saying a police presence would harm and traumatize students.

“What am I hearing? We are suggesting sending in the police to ‘manage’ students? It’s a school not a prison,” said Kearie Daniel, executive director of [Parents of Black Children](#), which works to eliminate anti-Black racism in the education system.

Trustee Hassan said the board “has failed to protect our kids,” noting if community members don’t feel safe sending their children to school, then he’d support police in schools, just temporarily.

“I know how it disproportionately affects certain communities, like my community — the Somali community, the Black community,” he said. “But, at the end of the day, kids are dying and these kids look like me,” said Hassan, referring to two fatalities in Scarborough schools earlier this year.

He polled the roughly 100 attendees at the meeting. Seventy-five per cent said York Memorial should temporarily bring in police, 91 per cent said the two schools should be separated again. Just one per cent was satisfied with how the TDSB has handled the situation at the school.

When asked on Friday by reporters about a police presence in the school, Russell-Rawlins said, “We need to bring all of our parents and our students together to decide what the best way is forward. ... We’ve heard conflicting ideas about what it is we should be doing.” But, she noted, “When we need to have police, because we are afraid of a risk, we do call police.”

Meanwhile, Mayor John Tory told reporters he had supported the TDSB’s School Resource Officer Program, which ran from 2008 to 2017, but realizes it was controversial.

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“Is there a different way in which we can have police help to keep schools safe?” asked the mayor at a housing announcement Friday. “I don’t know what that means — I just mean we should be talking about it.”

York Memorial’s woes began when a 2019 fire destroyed the former site. Students finished their school year at nearby George Harvey and the next year relocated to an empty building. Contrary to the wishes of parents and students, the board pushed ahead to merge the two schools, with the former George Harvey site absorbing the York Memorial students this fall and being renamed.

At Thursday’s meeting, Kwame Lennon, a superintendent of education, said after trustees voted in June 2021 to consolidate the two schools, recommendations were made and staff “worked very, very diligently to put a number” of them into place.

But the building wasn’t ready in September. Teachers hadn’t set up their classes and science labs weren’t functional. Some rooms were missing locks, some teachers missing keys, some inner-school phones and PA systems weren’t working, which are crucial in a lockdown scenario. The auditorium wasn’t operational, so there were no assemblies to build school spirit. The main gym was transformed into a storage space, with desks and chairs piled high. And the cafeteria was missing equipment, which meant the breakfast program was put on hold and pizza had to be ordered in at lunchtime.

One teacher, who asked not to be identified for fear of repercussions, said during those initial weeks the majority of students were “extremely patient and lovely.” But some teens could see “it was a chaotic situation. ... They started pushing boundaries.” Hall monitors and office staff were “overwhelmed,” temporary administrators came and went, and teachers grew fearful as tensions escalated and problems mounted.

On Oct. 28, a large fight between students erupted in the hallway, with police called to the school. That, and the facilities issues, prompted 14 teachers to engage in a work refusal that lasted a couple of weeks before all were ordered back by the Ministry of Labour. Staffing levels have also been impacted by several teachers on medical leave and supply teachers who aren’t picking up jobs at the school.



Then on Nov. 15, Toronto police say a staff member called 911 to report a “person with a gun” and armed officers entered the school, immediately searching the premises. The school was cleared, no firearm located and the lockdown was lifted, with no injuries reported.

Police won’t disclose how many times they’ve been called to the school, but say officers attend when requested.

*With files from David Rider*

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