

Posted on Tue, Mar. 1, 2011

Report: Phila. school violence cuts learning

By Kristen A. Graham
Inquirer Staff Writer

Racial and ethnic violence and conflicts routinely hinder student learning in the Philadelphia School District, according to a report to be issued Tuesday by the city Commission on Human Relations.

The district has failed to adequately address "a system-wide problem," notes the report, which was based on the 11 public hearings that followed the racially motivated attacks on Asian students at South Philadelphia High School in 2009.

To fix the problem, the commission recommends an overhaul of some district policies and the adoption of new rules. It also called on the district to take proactive steps, rather than simply reacting to problems when they arise. The commission has no enforcement power.

A spokeswoman for the school system, Jamilah Fraser, said Monday night that the district would thoroughly review the report, work closely with the commission, and look for ways to improve conditions inside schools.

"The School District of Philadelphia is committed to providing a safe and secure environment for all students to learn," Fraser said in a statement. "The district has implemented a number of programs to make sure that students are safe, including a well-trained group of school police, counselors, teachers, and safety officers."

The 26-page report, "Widening the Circle of Our Concern: Public Perceptions of the School District of Philadelphia's Response to Intergroup Conflicts," encompasses the testimony of 130 witnesses and the written statements of 40 others. The attacks on Asian students spurred changes that the commission said should be expanded districtwide.

The district "is not doing enough to resolve problems associated with intergroup conflicts and violence," the report said, citing public testimony. "We heard from witnesses who believe that the district has been unresponsive to their complaints."

The complaints ranged from "petty discourtesy and isolated acts of verbal aggression to physical and emotional harassment, bullying, and physical assaults." The commission examined conflicts based on race, color, and national origin; immigration status; disability; sex; and sexual orientation.

The Inquirer obtained the report before its public release.

Among the report's more serious findings: The district's policies to combat violence and ethnic tensions are applied inconsistently. Discipline is uneven from school to school.

The structure for reporting problems is unclear, and staff members often lack proper training in dealing with racial and ethnic conflicts. Despite a legal mandate to provide translation services for all students and parents who need them, the existing services are inadequate and not well-publicized, a problem that limits English-language learners' abilities to alert officials about problems.

Still, there are bright spots.

The report said that many district students acted as "agents for change" in reducing conflicts, and that many principals and teachers created supportive school environments. It also highlighted effective programs in place in some district schools and noted that there had been some improvement in the last year in how school staffers were trained to deal with language services.

"We heard about schools where educators and staff actively attempt to build bridges and model respectful behavior," the report said. "We saw models of community-based programs that allow young people from different backgrounds to relate to each other through shared interests."

But the district's zero-tolerance discipline policy is a "serious impediment" to intergroup harmony, and the district has "not fully capitalized on more constructive means, which include positive behavior support, peer mediation, and restorative justice approaches."

Those three approaches are antiviolence programs that have been used in a limited way in the district.

The zero-tolerance policy, which mandates automatic punishment for certain infractions, is counterproductive and does not address why students act out, the report says. Those findings were echoed in a recent report by the student organizing group Youth United for Change.

"The district should acknowledge the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance and commit itself to sending a single consistent message of helping difficult students rather than alienating them," said one community advocate quoted in the report.

Suspensions are handed out too often, the report concludes. District officials have said they have taken steps to lower the number of out-of-school suspensions handed out in the last two years.

The report made several recommendations, including: updating some district policies and enforcing others; requiring all schools to adopt their own procedures to report discrimination and harassment; and taking steps to prevent future conflicts.

The report's release marks the final formal action triggered by the South Philadelphia High attacks.

In addition to the city commission's hearings and this report, the 2009 violence also prompted an internal district probe of the violence and investigations by the U.S. Department of Justice

and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

The state commission and federal probes concluded in December with two nearly identical court settlements that mandate a host of changes at South Philadelphia High, including a schoolwide antiharassment policy, more robust translation services for English-language learners and their parents, and publicly available data on harassment at the school.

The district should spread the tenets of the South Philadelphia settlements to all schools, the report recommended.

But while multiple authorities will be watching the district on its enforcement of the South Philadelphia settlement through June 2013, there is no such enforcement mechanism for the city commission's report.

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