

SPiRiT Community Newspapers

Can Peers Make Peace? Implementing Programs in Schools

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By Lou Mancinelli

School district employees themselves cannot agree what the best way is to improve learning climates in Philadelphia's schools. Can tensions in the schools between peoples of different races and cultures be eased by empowering students with conflict resolution skills? Will bullies learn they cannot harass and fight schoolmates by being suspended?

Peer-to-peer mediation, restorative practices and disciplinary action like suspension were the three public testimonies given—all by individuals who work with School District of Philadelphia teachers in some way—at the eighth of a series of eleven citywide meetings hosted by chair members of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Rights (PCHR) recently at the Samuels Rec Center in Port Richmond. The public meetings are designed to be listening sessions to generate public dialogue between students, staff, police and community members about how to increase inter-group harmony in Philadelphia schools.

The meetings come in the wake of cultural violence at a Southwest Philadelphia high school last winter that set the city's zero-tolerance policy wheels rolling, and caused the superintendent to create a number of task forces on racial and cultural harmony that sent task force members into schools to observe and meet with faculties to discuss issues (reports were presented to the school board last week and can be found online at www.philasd.org/harmony).

While those incidents coincide with the timing of the creation of this committee, the meetings are more reflective of a long-brewing cycle of tensions between peoples of different races and cultures in Philadelphia schools, according to Kay Kyungsun Yu, a chair member. The group will present a report that documents its findings and makes concrete recommendations for potential action to the school board early next year.

"It's a matter of viewing children through a different lens," said Curry Bailey, who for the past nine years has worked as a drug-prevention and safety coordinator for the district training teachers and students in peer-to-peer mediation.

He said the technique is cost-effective because if you teach a fifth grader the skills and continue to refresh their knowledge, it can be something that lasts with the student through high school and beyond. Bailey uses Peers Making Peace, a Texas-based research-and evidence-based program that teaches students skills they need to attempt to resolve their own problems. If tensions begin to escalate between individuals they

know that, perhaps at lunchtime, they can sit down with a mediator and attempt to resolve the issue.

According to Bailey, who has trained staff in peer-mediation in over 60 Philadelphia schools, all Philadelphia middle schools and high schools are supposed to have a peer-to-peer mediation program as part of Philadelphia's Imagine2014 education initiative.

"We do them a disservice when we don't empower them with the skills to resolve their own problems," Bailey said. "They've been beat up and marginalized enough ... Once you train the kids it begins to take on a life of its own. If you have a mediation program maybe you don't need to suspend somebody."

Ericka Washington, a deputy of attendance and truancy for the school district used her five minutes of testimony to introduce the district's new systematic and comprehensive approach for dealing with violence, bullying and harassment in schools which includes mediation for violence, but not for bullying and harassment, for those, the consequence is disciplinary action: letters to parents, suspension and if necessary, expulsion.

Over the summer, according to Washington, the district revised its sexual harassment policy to include all harassment, and its bullying policy now includes cyber-bullying. There are also rules against both, as well as consequences for breaking the rules and positive incentives to inspire good behavior, all of which have been explained in a letter sent to all parents and guardians of all students in the district.

And this week, according to Washington all Philadelphia schools will be implementing appropriate protocol to the new policy as well as a new curriculum once a week that teaches kids how to get along with one another and resolve conflict. Kindergartners through eighth graders will learn from the evidence-based Second Step Violence Program and high school students will use School Connect. All councilors have been trained in the programs and teachers will develop their understanding throughout the school year.

"We have to make a clear message that it's not right," said Washington about the reason there is no mediation in instances of bullying or harassment. "We don't want the victim to feel like it's their fault. There is an imbalance of power when you bring both partners together to talk."

After the first instance of bullying or harassment, a letter is sent home to the student's guardian, according to Washington. After the second, the school sets the penalty. For elementary students it could be the loss of recess, for older kids, maybe an in-school suspension.

"We want to allow the schools to introduce the best practices for what they think is best for their building," she said.

The challenge, Washington said is connecting the dots between peer-mediation and disciplinary action so that it works on a multi-cultural level and added, that teaching conflict resolution must continue outside of school walls for it to be effective. She stressed the need for communities to embrace and promulgate the ideals. Classes will be offered at community centers, she said.

"A peer mediation model that is based on the idea that both parties are at fault would not be appropriate," said Dana Barnett, an adjunct professor at Temple University and a member of Teacher Action Group (TAG). "There are mediation models that do not have the assumption of equal fault. Mediation is only one of many restorative justice practices."

At the meeting, Barnett described TAG's mission. TAG is a group organized by Philadelphia school teachers that seek to promote at the classroom, school and district level practices that build mutual trust, respect and cooperation between all members of the school community. It opposes punitive approaches to discipline that criminalize students while failing to reduce violence and conflict.

"TAG promotes a restorative justice model that attempts to work with kids to tackle some of their behavior problems along with building a school climate of cooperation, mutual cooperation, and respect," said Barnett. "Kids are held accountable for their behavior, but it focuses on repairing the harm done rather than on punitive measures."

"A lot of times newcomers are targeted," said Kyungsun Yu. "We want to protect the kids and enhance inter-group relationships."

For more info, visit www.phila.gov/humanrelations. The next hearing will be Wed., Oct. 13 from 4PM-6PM at the Free Library of Philadelphia (Central), 1901 Vine Street (between 19th & 20th St. on the Parkway). Come Out and Be Heard!