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City panel says hearings on school violence heard of problems and also promise

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November 17, 2010 | By Kristen A. Graham, Inquirer Staff Writer

For nearly a year, people from all over the city have told the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations stories - sobering, inspiring, instructive - about intergroup tension and violence in city schools.

Since January, the city panel has held 11 hearings on the subject, drawing testimony from more than 100 people on subjects ranging from attacks on immigrants to bullying because of sexual orientation. The hearings were prompted by racial violence at South Philadelphia High.

And after the final hearing Tuesday evening, commission chair Kay Kyungsun Yu said she had heard loud and clear that creative answers to violence and bullying exist in the Philadelphia School District, but only in pockets.

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"These solutions must be implemented districtwide," Yu said in an interview at the Columbus Square Recreation Center in South Philadelphia. "The focus has to be: We take what works, and we make it systemic."

One district teacher told the panel on Tuesday that while he appreciated the district's new anti-bullying policy, he saw problems.

"The policy is wonderful," said Michael Johnson, a science teacher at Germantown High. "The implementation is missing."

Johnson advises the school's Gay-Straight Alliance and has been designated Germantown's go-to person for compliance on the policy.

"I am trying to do what I can, but it's not a systematic thing," Johnson told the commission. "It's just, this guy walked in, so they said, 'Oh, good, you do it.'"

Susan Patrone, the student liaison at Smith Elementary, a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school at 19th and Wharton Streets, said that because of the city's burgeoning charter-school movement, the students in public school are often Philadelphia's neediest.

The district "absolutely needs more emotional-support classes, especially at the elementary schools," she said. "We have long waiting lists."

Harold Jordan, a community organizer with the American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, often works with students who have dealt with violence in city classrooms.

"There's a lot of disrespect in Philadelphia schools," he said. "There's too much violence."

Jordan examined school suspension data and discovered that thousands of students were suspended last year for issues that had nothing to do with violence - for dress-code violations, for bad language.

"I don't think we can suspend our way out of this situation," he said. "The district should invest more in alternatives to out-of-school suspension."

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(Page 2 of 2)

But some district officials spoke of promising practices.

Larry Melton, principal of Bok High School, said that the vocational school at Ninth and Mifflin Streets has had to change with its demographics.

The school's Asian population has more than tripled, to 17 percent from 5 percent, in recent years.

In September, two Chinese immigrant students were beaten by a large group of students. The victims required hospital treatment.

Officials at the time said the incident was related to a freshman hazing day and not racially motivated, but advocates questioned that.

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Melton said the school had been deliberate about creating a safe space.

There are more clubs that cater to different student interests, and there is a clear procedure in place for handling harassment. The number of counselors has doubled, to four, and there is cultural sensitivity training for teachers and students.

"In a way, we have become a high school of preference for students from all over the city," Melton said. "We welcome the diversity."

David Robinson, who works with GEAR UP, a college readiness program, at Furness, another South Philadelphia high school, said the school's violent incidents were down this year and its attendance was up.

Robinson said he and Furness principal Tim McKenna firmly believed in giving students "hooks" to come to school - clubs they care about, teachers who listen.

"There are outlets for students' voices to be heard," Robinson said. "When you give a child a voice, an opportunity to truly be heard, that child feels respected."

With the one-year anniversary of the racial violence at South Philadelphia High nearing, Otis Hackney, the school's new principal, said he and his staff had worked diligently to improve the school.

There's been a lot of listening to community groups, to students, to parents, and a lot of talking about expectations.

"I've talked to the students and made it very clear - if you see something, do something," Hackney said. "I'm not saying we're perfect, but we do work hard."

About Dec. 3, the one-year anniversary, Hackney was clear.

"My hope is that it will be an anniversary, and not a repeat," he said.

Mayor Nutter also addressed the commission, saying he looked forward to its report on the hearings, due in January.

"It is our mission and our collective responsibility to address these issues," the mayor said.

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