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Panel holds final hearing on violence in schools

By DAFNEY TALES Philadelphia Daily News talesd@phillynews.com 215-854-5084

The city's Human Relations Commission yesterday held its final public hearing on intergroup and racial violence in schools,

and will now compile hundreds of testimonies into a report in an effort to curb school violence.

The report, which will be presented in January to the School Reform Commission, Superintendent Arlene Ackerman and Mayor Nutter, will focus mainly on preventing and addressing intergroup conflict and increasing language access for students and their guardians, said Commission Chairwoman Kay Kyungsun Yu.

During the 11 sessions that began in January, the five-member panel heard an outpouring of testimonies from more than 125 community activists, city leaders, students and parents, she said.

"There is so much that has been shared," she said. "Tonight was really a reflection of the kinds of things we heard over and over again: That our young people who are marginalized tend to be the ones who are targeted."

Though solutions brought up during the hearings are already in place in many schools, they need to spread districtwide, Yu said.

The hearings were convened, in part, because of the violence that erupted last December against several Asian students at South Philadelphia High School. The attacks resulted in a weeklong boycott by dozens of students and a probe by the Department of Justice. The principal at the time, LaGreta Brown, resigned several months later.

South Philly principal Otis Hackney, who spoke before the commission last night, said that the school has been making strides.

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"We're a year out from what happened," he said, referring to the attacks. "My hope is that it's always an anniversary and not a repeat."

The hearings focused on violence motivated by race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation.

While Nutter, who made a brief appearance at the meeting, stressed the importance of creating a safe learning environment, several others who testified last night suggested ways to curb race-based violence.

Bach Tong, 17, a former South Philly High student who is now at the Science Leadership Academy, said that schools should expand cultural education.

Nancy Nguyen, branch manager for immigrant advocacy group Boat People SOS, applauded the district for increasing the number of its bilingual counseling assistants, but urged them to improve training.

Aviva Pinski, an activist for immigrant communities, said that schools should have appropriate language access and should focus on building relationships with foreign-born parents.

Others at the meeting last night, held at the Columbus Square Recreation Center, 12th and Wharton streets, in South Philadelphia, raised concerns about the growing number of out-of-school suspensions because of the district's zero-tolerance policy, teen girls in abusive relationships and the lack of LGBT awareness in district schools.

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