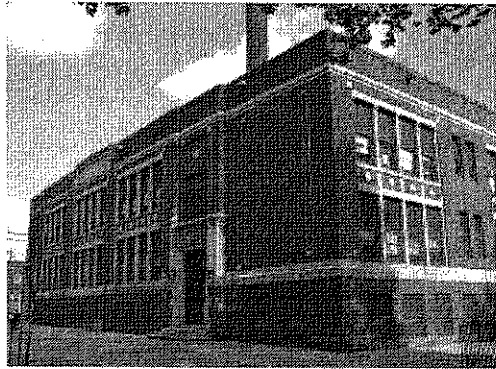


Oct 14, 2010 by Aaron Kase

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Student Testifies on Harassment at Benjamin Franklin High



With his grey hair neatly pulled back in a black rasta hat, Charles Timmons strummed his guitar and addressed the auditorium: “No godforsaken guns, no lifetaking guns, no guns,” he sang in a clear, high voice. Timmons, an elementary school music teacher, was testifying at the Central Library branch on Vine Street on his vision for reducing youth violence in schools.

“It’s sad how generation after generation sees the same problems,” he said. “Children today are not enjoying childhood.” His answer to pervasive bullying? A radio show on international music and a pen-pal program, to expose kids to different cultures and address the ignorance he says leads to the racial problems prevalent in so many Philadelphia schools.

Last night the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations held the tenth of its twelve scheduled hearings on school violence, spurred by last year’s much-publicized attack on Asian students at South Philly High. While Timmons’ contribution was musical and upbeat, other testimonies took a more somber tone, most notably in a ninth-grade female’s horrifying account of entrenched sexual harassment among students at Benjamin Franklin High.

The girl, who did not give her name or allow herself to be filmed, spoke about how she came to Franklin this year as a straight-A student with high expectations. She had heard rumors that the school near Broad and Spring Garden was “bad,” but didn’t realize how bad until she got there and was subjected to constant provocation by male students. “I was just walking down the hall and kids were grabbing and touching me,” she told the commissioners. The door to the girl’s locker room doesn’t lock, she said, and the boys repeatedly run in and accost the girls while they try to change. She was jumped and beat up by a whole bunch of kids on freshman Friday, and when she went to school administrators for help, she said, they just told her, “Stay away from certain students. Or we can transfer you.”

The girl testified that her grades are dropping as she thinks about cutting class, discouraged by the violence, harassment and high number of pregnancies at the school. The only thing that keeps her going, she said, is her love for the Junior ROTC program. When the girl finished her tale of terror, Commissioner Marshall Freeman praised her for having the courage to speak up and promised personally to help if she found herself in any more bad situations.

While the Franklin student’s testimony was the most powerful, other teachers and activists spoke critically about what is a still-discouraging picture of culture and climate inside Philadelphia’s schools. Helen Gym from **Asian Americans United** said the district is still not honestly addressing the causes of violence against Asians in South Philly Schools, despite claims to the contrary. “Announcements are not achievements,” Gym said. “The district has two solutions— suspend or ignore.” Debbie Weiner from **Public Citizens for Children and Youth** spoke in favor of implementing **positive behavior supports** in schools, a strategy of explicitly teaching kids respect under a clear, consistent set of rules and expectations. However, Weiner added, “the school district has a long and unfortunate history of seeing great recommendations vanish into thin air.”

The Human Relations Commission hopes that doesn’t happen this time. They have listened to over 110 testimonials at ten hearings this year, with two left to go. Later the commission will compile the best suggestions into a report to be provided to the school district and other parties, said Rue Landau, the commission’s executive director. “The report will be based on the themes that make it to the top,” Landau said. Will Timmons’ pen-pals idea make the cut? That’s unclear, but rest assured we have not heard the last of harassment at Benjamin Franklin High School.

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