

Philadelphia Inquirer
Wednesday, March 17, 2010

Students give perspective on school violence

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When you walk into her high school, the first thing you see are bars on the windows, student Mariah Porter said.

Then you walk through metal detectors. There are school and city police present, and sometimes students are patted down, said Porter, a senior at Overbrook High, where she said there are more security guards than counselors.

"Some students do react violently to the conditions they are put in," Porter testified before the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations in Southwest Philadelphia yesterday.

Spurred by December attacks on Asian students at South Philadelphia High, the commission is holding 11 hearings on citywide school violence this year. No formal complaints have been filed with the commission, but after the hearings conclude, it will compile a report with recommendations for action by the Philadelphia School District.

Porter was one of several speakers who belong to the Philadelphia Student Union, a group active in some district schools. The students said that they and their peers ought to be part of the solution to calming school violence.

DeVante Wilson of Carver High School of Engineering and Science said the Student Union would organize students and adults to take a nonviolence pledge.

"Most students are glad to be at school because it is an escape from the violence they are surrounded by at home or in their personal life," said Wilson, a senior. "So how does it make them feel better when students aren't safe when they're at school?"

Superintendent Arlene Ackerman has said she wants to work with the students, and invited some to sit on a blue-ribbon panel to tackle youth violence.

Wilson said he asked some South Philadelphia High African American students why they thought there was conflict between them and Asian students at the school.

"African Americans felt as if the Asians had more resources, and that led to violence between them," Wilson said. That's not true, he said, but it's adults' job to help shoot down myths like those.

Some district schools have calmed racial tensions. Fels High principal Eileen Coutts said she realized that Asian students there were being targeted during the 2008-09 school year.

She called on community members to help, and launched an "International Ambassadors" program that matches all new students with buddies. Violence is down at the school in Northeast Philadelphia, and the work continues.

"I think it's important that the different communities continue to voice their outrage," Coutts said.

Like Wilson, Coutts said she thinks jealousy and misperceptions play a part in igniting tensions. Recently, a Fels fund drive for Haitian earthquake relief triggered anger and violence toward Haitian students.

Coutts handled it by phoning every Fels parent and told them what was happening.

"That was the end of it," she said.

One community member called attention to the plight of African immigrant students. Carol Bangura, a native of Sierra Leone, said she was bullied and teased as a student in Philadelphia public schools.

"Those issues are still in place for African students today," said Bangura. She said African and Caribbean students often fell between the cracks.

"There are no resources for us," said Bangura, who runs a nonprofit that works with African immigrant students at the Morton School in Southwest Philadelphia.

John Frangipani, district school operations chief, said he would meet with Bangura.

The African population is growing, he said. "We certainly want to give them support," said Frangipani.