

Crimes in the classroom

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By Susan Snyder and Dylan Purcell

The Philadelphia Inquirer

A series of racial attacks at a Philadelphia high school in late 2009 – and the school district's inadequate response – prompted *The Inquirer* to launch an investigation into school violence. Its seven-part series, "[Assault on Learning](#)", and follow-up stories published throughout the past year, showed that violence is widespread and underreported in the city's schools.

The five-member reporting team looked at violence among young children, how the district's main intervention system for helping students failed and how violent acts occurred in classrooms on a regular basis, disrupting the school system's educational mission. A recent follow-up investigated school police with arrest records.

Examining a five-year period, the newspaper series found major assaults on teachers and students were rampant. Violence in the district occurred dozens of times a day, in every corner of the city, at every level of school. On an average day, 25 students, teachers or other staff members were beaten, robbed, sexually assaulted, or made victims of other violent crimes. Attacks were being initiated with intensity and ferocity by students as young as 5 years old.

The reporting team interviewed hundreds of teachers, parents, students and education

experts. Reporters obtained thousands of internal district police reports of violent incidents. A database of major crimes was created, revealing for the first time the level of violence school-by-school.

In order to quantify the violence problem, the team first had to wrestle with the district for electronic copies of serious incidents and student enrollment. After several months the district turned over the records to fulfill a public records request.

Those records spelled out the exact nature of violent acts committed in classrooms, school buildings and even to students and teachers commuting to and from school.

When combined with enrollment figures, those raw numbers became violent crime rates that detailed an epidemic of assaults in many of the neighborhood high schools and a surprising number of other schools that never made the news, including elementaries.

By adjusting the incident numbers for dramatic changes in enrollment over a five-year span, the database also served a different purpose. It revealed, in some schools, staggering changes in crime rates that were seemingly unexplainable. That fit with the many voices in the schools who told reporters that the reporting of incidents was discouraged or downplayed and some crimes went completely unreported.

The newspaper also commissioned an extensive, independently administered survey of school staff. Michael G. Hagen, associate professor and graduate chair in political science at Temple University, developed the survey in conjunction with *The Inquirer*. To gain access to teachers and aides, we asked the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers – the union – to notify its members that they could link to the survey through the PFT website. The union, however, had no access to the responses. More than 750 Philadelphia teachers and aides – 6 percent of the district's 13,000 teachers and aides – responded to the 31-question survey. The results were analyzed by Hagen and Jason Martin, a graduate student.

The findings were startling even to an informed public. In the survey, about two-thirds of teachers who responded said that violence and disruption in their buildings hindered their students' learning.

In the aftermath of the series, the newspaper received many tips about other problems contributing to the violence in the city's schools: Some offenses in which students were seriously injured were downgraded to disorderly conduct. Expensive

safety cameras were malfunctioning or not being properly monitored. Safety plans for the most dangerous schools were scant. And perhaps most disturbingly, there were serious concerns about the quality of the district's school police force, including officers with conduct and drug problems.

The district's school police are unarmed and are not police-academy trained. They receive only four weeks of training before going on the job. They are not drug screened or given psychological testing. A national consultant that conducted safety audits of district schools in spring 2010 criticized some officers for yelling at students and "aggressively challenging them" for minor issues. Even the police officers' union president was critical of training and screening requirements.

Reporters decided to conduct criminal record checks of the school district police force. The first step was to obtain an employee list, which was secured through a Right to Know request. But names by themselves were not enough. To accurately match officers to court records, reporters also had to get their birth dates, which the district declined to provide. Birth dates of government employees are typically considered confidential in Pennsylvania.

Instead, those were acquired through a reliable source.

Crossing the officer information with a separately obtained database of millions of court cases in the state over several years, the team found more than a dozen matches for notable arrests, including officers with crack cocaine, marijuana, heroin, DUI, assault and theft arrests. In each case, reporters meticulously corroborated the information by pulling court files, talking with the officers or their lawyers, and obtaining their internal personnel files through a source. In one case, reporters confronted an officer who had to go to court on cocaine possession charges the first day of school and showed up in her uniform. Another officer had an active bench warrant out for his arrest yet reported to a local elementary school each day and served as the school police officer.

The reporters eliminated cases in which charges were withdrawn or the officer was found not guilty or the charges were minor, but they included those cases that resulted in ARD (Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition) or some variation. The reporters found that in one of the cases a Pennsylvania law was applied which permits ARD with probation if the defendant provides proof of drug addiction. Since the district screening process was limited to convictions, these admittances were not

considered for job performance review.

The personnel files were key to the investigation because they showed that most of the officers who ran afoul of the law also got into trouble on the job. A high school officer, for example, was brought up on school district discipline charges after he was alleged to have stolen an orange juice and frosted Entenmann's chocolate doughnuts from a local convenience store while on duty and in uniform.

In some cases, the district hired officers who had prior arrests. One officer said that it was easier to get hired as a school district cop than it was at Walmart.

In the aftermath of the story, the district promised to do more intensive background checks on prospective officers. The city's deputy mayor for public safety also plans to recommend even tighter screening procedures for school district officers and increased training, including the 32-week police academy.

The newspaper's examination of school violence at least in part prompted a number of other significant changes. The school district in December began posting detailed information on violent incidents at each school on its website in an effort to be more transparent. Earlier this year, it changed its system for reporting violence, giving the primary responsibility to school police officers, rather than principals, because officers are on the front line dealing with safety.

The state appointed a new safety watchdog to advocate for victims of violence in the city's schools. The position had been vacant for more than two years. And the School Reform Commission, the district's governing body, created a special committee to focus on safety and school climate with a commitment to come up with a comprehensive plan to address school violence.

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