



NEWS



COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS

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For Immediate Release:

PHILADELPHIA COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS RELEASES “WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF OUR CONCERN”

*Includes findings and recommendations from a yearlong series of public hearings
on intergroup conflicts in Philadelphia’s public schools*

Philadelphia, PA - The Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations today released the findings of a yearlong series of public hearings where they heard first-hand from parents, teachers, students, principals, and other community members about their experiences with intergroup conflicts in Philadelphia’s public schools. The report, titled “Widening the Circle of Our Concern,” also contains the PCHR’s specific reform recommendations for the School District of Philadelphia.

“School-based intergroup conflicts are a serious issue in Philadelphia and, too often, the School District is not doing enough to address it,” said Kay Kyungsun Yu, Chairperson of the Commission. “This is a system-wide problem that demands a system-wide response—and we offer today a roadmap for what that response should look like.”

Yu said that the goal of the year-long process—which included 11 public hearings; testimony from 130 students, teachers, parents, administrators and community members; and written statements from 40 more—was to find a way to advance the idea of “creating communities of respect in all our schools,” and, “ensuring all students acquire the tools needed to effectively negotiate intergroup differences and challenges over a lifetime.”

“We took inspiration from President Obama’s January 12 speech in Tucson, AZ to name our report ‘Widening the Circle of Our Concern’” Rue Landau, Executive Director of the Commission, said. In his speech, the President said, “our task, working together, is to constantly widen the circle of our concern so that we bequeath the American dream to future generations.” Landau said, “It is essential that we strive to build a climate of respect and tolerance across the City’s schools to widen the circle of our concern to include all of the diverse young people of Philadelphia.”

As the City agency charged with deciding and mediating intergroup conflicts, the PCHR conducted its series of public hearings to assess how effectively the School District is dealing, system-wide, with the broad range of intergroup conflicts existing within our schools. The report issued today is the product of that process and includes the following findings and recommendations.

- Finding 1 Intergroup conflicts are a widespread problem in Philadelphia public schools that interfere with student learning.
- Finding 2 District policies fail to provide a clear and consistent framework for preventing and resolving intergroup conflicts, and these policies are neither uniformly implemented, nor clearly communicated.
- Finding 3 The District has relied on a zero-tolerance discipline policy, but this policy alienates students and has an adverse effect on school climate. The District has not fully capitalized on more constructive means, which include positive behavior support, peer mediation, and restorative justice approaches.
- Finding 4 Existing policies and resources related to language access are not widely publicized and are inadequate to meet the needs of all the students and families that are legally entitled to language access services.
- Finding 5 Students are agents for change in reducing intergroup conflicts and promoting intergroup harmony.
- Finding 6 Educators and community groups build bridges among different groups of youth and create supportive school environments.
- Finding 7 Witnesses provided compelling examples of approaches to preventing intergroup conflicts in Philadelphia's schools.
- Finding 8 Witnesses provided important recommendations for resolving conflicts and addressing bias-based harassment.

RESOLVE THE CONFLICTS

- Recommendation 1 Recognize intergroup conflicts are a system-wide problem that requires a system-wide solution.
- Recommendation 2 Re-evaluate, update, and enforce relevant District policies.
- Recommendation 3 Require all principals in the District to enforce these new policies with programming to create communities of respect within their schools.
- Recommendation 4 Effectively evaluate and respond to reported incidents.

TRACK THE CONFLICTS

- Recommendation 5 Create a clear path for all students, teachers, parents, and administrators to report incidents of intergroup conflicts.
- Recommendation 6 Use the existing District survey to collect information on intergroup relations.

PREVENT FUTURE CONFLICTS

- Recommendation 7 Ensure each student, parent, teacher, and administrator knows about all relevant policies, programs, and reporting procedures.
- Recommendation 8 Give principals, teachers, and administrators the tools to ensure these policies are consistently and effectively implemented.
- Recommendation 9 Communicate effectively in all languages heard in our schools.

“Our recommendations offer a clear, common-sense roadmap for the District to follow to improve the way they resolve, track, and prevent future conflicts,” Yu said. “The PCHR will now focus on working with the School District and the community to see that these recommendations are implemented.”

About “Widening the Circle of Our Concern”: The full report and Executive Summary are available for viewing and downloading at www.wideningthecircle.org. Also available at the website for download is a large-type format for the visually impaired, and translations of the Executive Summary in the following languages: Spanish, Arabic, French, Khmer, Vietnamese, Simplified Chinese, Russian, Haitian Creole, Indonesian, Nepali, Burmese, Lao, and Mandinka. Translations of the full report in some of these languages will be available within two weeks at the same location. If translations in additional languages are needed, please contact the PCHR.

About the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations: Established in 1951 under the City Charter, the PCHR is the quasi-judicial agency empowered to enforce Philadelphia's civil rights laws and to deal with all matters of intergroup conflicts within the City. Through its Compliance Division, PCHR investigates claims of unlawful discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and the delivery of City services, on the basis of race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, ancestry, age, disability, marital status, or source of income. The Commissioners decide disputed claims through adjudicatory public hearings. And through its Community Relations Division, PCHR mediates to ease intergroup and community tensions and conducts public hearings for informational and educational purposes.

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