

# **Widening the Circle of our Concern – Public Perceptions of the School District of Philadelphia's Response to Intergroup Conflicts**

Kay Kyungsun Yu 04 April 2011

**"Our task, working together, is to constantly widen the circle of our concern so that we bequeath the American Dream to future generations."**

**—President Barack Obama | Tucson, Arizona | January 12, 2011**

## **Definiton: Intergroup Conflicts**

Intergroup conflicts are any disagreement between two or more individuals or groups that differ in terms of characteristics such as race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, ancestry, age, disability, or source of income, where such disagreements result in wrongful discrimination, disharmony, unlawful harassment, confrontational clashes, or even violence.

The conflict may arise in the context of economic competition, struggles over political and social

dominance, or disputes over ideas, beliefs, or points of view.

Intergroup conflicts may be the result of the kind of biased judgment that is appropriately labeled racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, sexism, xenophobia, or religious intolerance, but it need not necessarily rise to that level to cause serious discord and disruption in a school community. Intergroup conflicts tend to generate hostility and unfounded negative assessments of the members of other groups. Intergroup conflicts may stand in the way of fair and respectful treatment of the members of other groups.

## **Executive Summary**

In January 2010, after the violent incidents at South Philadelphia High School against Asian immigrant students, the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations (PCHR) began a yearlong series of 11 public hearings as part of our unique mandate to address intergroup conflicts and claims of discrimination based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin, ancestry, age, disability, marital status, or source of income. The goal was to hear first-hand from parents, teachers, students, principals, and other community members about their experiences with intergroup conflicts in Philadelphia public schools. The Commission's understanding of intergroup conflicts covers a broad range of unfair, disrespectful, and

aggressive behavior that can cause emotional and physical harm and negatively impact students' ability to learn. One hundred thirty witnesses came forward to share their thoughts, and the Commission also received an additional 40 statements in writing. We took on this task because teaching students to embrace diversity is not only a social and economic imperative, it is a moral obligation.

The hearings brought to the surface the deep convictions of those who came to testify. The Commission learned that intergroup conflicts are a system-wide problem in the School District of Philadelphia that require a system-wide solution. Conflicts, both verbal and physical, recur in many schools. Testimony revealed that, too often, the District is not doing enough to prevent and resolve such conflicts and that inadequate language access—a legal right—is exacerbating the situation. We heard evidence that the zero-tolerance policy of automatic out-of-school suspensions that the District relies on does not mitigate intergroup tensions. Whenever discipline is imposed, the District must ensure that such discipline is both constructive and commensurate with the conduct and not solely punitive. We learned that effective and positive strategies like peer mediation, positive behavioral support, and restorative justice are not adequately utilized or implemented.

Yet students also spoke of positive, dynamic efforts that they engage in, with the assistance of supportive adults,

to peacefully resolve conflict. We heard about schools where educators and staff actively attempt to build bridges and model respectful behavior. We saw models of community-based programs that allow young people from different backgrounds to relate to each other through shared interests.

Despite these positive efforts, the widespread presence of unresolved intergroup conflicts remains. But it is the Commission's fervent hope that this report, and the recommendations it contains, will act as a catalyst to encourage the District to make resolving, tracking, and preventing intergroup conflicts a high priority. It is essential that the District act 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.

## Findings

- **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.

## **Recommendations for Resolving, Tracking, and Preventing Conflicts**

The Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations believes implementing the following recommendations will better equip the School District of Philadelphia to resolve, track, and prevent intergroup conflicts.

### **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.

**To read the full report and learn more about the  
Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations  
visit: <http://www.wideningthecircle.org/>.**