

Testimony of

Paul Vallas

Superintendent
Philadelphia Schools
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"Kids Killing Kids: Addressing Escalating Youth Violence"

Remarks by
Paul G. Vallas, CEO
School District of Philadelphia

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Good morning Senator Specter and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for allowing me to make brief comments on youth violence. In my five minutes, I will discuss the initiatives undertaken by the District that I feel have been most beneficial in reducing violence. In addition, I will discuss policy principles that will assist in further reducing violence.

Prior to beginning my comments, I want to thank Senator Specter for his invaluable support to the School District of Philadelphia. His leadership and support have allowed for the District to establish and fund a 40,000 student summer program and valuable after school academic programs for three straight years. His efforts have directly led to increasing the number of schools that have made Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind legislation from 22 to 160. His support has provided countless young people with a safe environment and I think we can all agree that giving kids a place to go after school and in the summer is a very important tool in our anti-violence tool box. The District and our 200,000 students, their parents and families owe Senator Specter a debt of gratitude, and we appreciate his continued support.

Schools are often the safest place in a community. However, violence continues to persist in many of our communities and neighborhoods.

In 2004, like many Philadelphians I was heartbroken by the shooting of Faheem Thomas Childs in front of Pierce Elementary School. Faheem was going about his day as he always did traveling to school when he was caught in the crossfire of rival drug gangs and shot. The tragic death of Faheem is something that will always stay with me and is a reminder that the role of schools has changed dramatically in that they are no longer confined to instruction. Rather, the tragic death of Faheem is a reminder that schools can and should play a much larger role in guaranteeing the safety of students, both in their schools and communities, as well as in the reduction of violence in the lives of young people.

The death of Faheem also reminds us that despite our best efforts, much work remains to be done to reduce youth violence. A recent report by Public / Private Ventures concerning the Philadelphia Youth Violence Prevention Partnership entitled, "Alive at 25, Reducing Youth Violence Through Monitoring and Support," highlights many of the factors that can shield children from exposure to specific risks for violence. These protective factors include an intolerant attitude toward deviance and violence, a commitment to school, positive peers, and a strong attachment to parents and religious commitment.

The protective factors highlighted by the Public / Private Ventures report are at the cornerstone of the District's violence prevention and reduction initiatives. By working with partners ranging from the city to faith based institutions, the District has implemented several programs that we believe will assist us in continuing to reduce youth violence through the protective factors discussed in the YVRP Report. These programs include:

? Communities of Faith Partnership. Recognizing that Communities of faith can have an enormous impact on children and in preventing violence, in 2004, the District launched a Faith Based Partnership to collaborate with communities of faith to improve the quality of life for our children. The \$3.0 million program partners with faith based institutions to organize parent patrols in schools, organize voluntary after-school clubs, coordinate after school gospel choirs, implement mentoring programs, and assist with crisis intervention.

? Youth Net Centers. As part of our faith-based partnership, the District is opening a Youth-Net center in each of the District's nine regions. Through the program, 40,000 students will receive over one million hours of tutoring, mentoring and recreational activity. The first center opened this spring at Bluford Elementary in West Philadelphia.

? Parental Involvement. Because a strong and positive attachment to parents and guardians is crucial to reducing violence, the District has launched several creative parent involvement programs. These include our efforts to hire 2,000 parents to reach out to and engage the most difficult to reach parents. The \$1.7 million program will utilize parents to staff parent help desks, form parent patrols to monitor schools, and assist in truancy outreach. One of the goals of the parental involvement program is to stem violence by engaging more parents in the lives of their children, schools, and the community.

The strength of the District's parent involvement program was recently recognized by the William Penn Foundation. The foundation awarded the District almost \$750,000 to establish a pilot program at Bok High School in the South Region, Austin Meehan Middle School in the East Region and Benjamin Franklin High School in the Central Region. Grant funds will be used to inform parents on District programs, parenting skills, and the leadership skills necessary to allow parents to assume a leadership role in the schools and in the community.

? Juvenile Justice Curriculum. We have also worked with the District Attorney, Lynne Abraham, to establish a juvenile justice curriculum to instruct all middle school children about juvenile justice and criminal justice. The curriculum will instruct young people to make responsible, law abiding choices and the value of non-violence in addition to teaching the value of crime-free behavior and constitutional law.

? After School Programs. The District also conducts an after-school extended-day program in every elementary school. The \$15.0 million program is conducted Monday through Thursday. The first one-hour and fifteen minutes of the program is dedicated to mathematics and literacy and the remaining forty-five minutes of the program is dedicated to enrichment programs such as art and music. The program currently serves an estimated 28,000 children in grades K-8.

? Special Programs. In addition to our long-term programs, the District also provides special programs from time to time to remind students of the value of non-violence. During my tenure at the District we have implemented several such programs including:

- o Student Anti-Violence Conference. In the last two years over 1,000 students have attended our Saturday conference workshops on Bullying, Conflict Resolution, Self-Esteem, Sexual Harassment, Truancy and School Climate and Safety.

- o Safe Night Philadelphia. Safe Night Philadelphia is a city-wide effort coordinated by the District to address the issue of youth safety one night at a time. The concept of Safe Night originated in Milwaukee, WI in the mid-1990s as a response to rising youth homicide rates. Safe Night gives young people the opportunity to be safe and have fun, connect with local community youth organizations, and learn non-violent ways to resolve conflict. On June 3, 2005, the District along with the Police Athletic League, and the City of Philadelphia, the YMCA, and faith and community partners hosted 300 separate Safe Night events across Philadelphia.

- o Project Peace. The District, along with the Pennsylvania Bar Association and the Pennsylvania Attorney General, is in the process of implementing a peer mediation program in sixteen schools. It is our intention to expand the program to all District K-8 schools over the next few years. Project PEACE works to reduce conflict and violence in schools by teaching students how to discuss and mediate disagreements peacefully. It empowers children, who are still in the formative years, with the important life-skills that promote constructive communication, problem-solving, critical-thinking and self-esteem. Children become active participants in governing behavior in their classrooms by taking on the role of mediator and using the mediation process. With the help of neutral peer mediators, conflicts can be settled

in a positive manner, benefiting the school climate as a whole.

While we have not entirely eliminated violence in our schools, we are making serious headway as a result of our efforts. Recent district incident reports show much progress as well as the need to do more. In comparison to the same time last year, assaults on teachers and administrators are down 10%, drug and alcohol offenses are down 6.9%, morals offenses are down 5.0% and rapes and attempted rapes are down 10%. Weapons offenses are down 60%. However, violence remains an issue. (This year student shootings of students are up from 2 to 6 and assaults are up 6.6%.) On the whole, offenses are down 0.06%. It is important to note that the District records incidents on a 24 hour 7 day a week basis and incidents recorded include incidents occurring in side and outside of school.

As CEO of the District, it is not enough for me to talk about these programs and their statistical results; I am also an active participant in them. You will find me and my staff at many of the events and programs mentioned in my testimony. On any given day or night, my Chief of Staff might be coordinating an anti-violence event at a high school, while my Government Relations team is coordinating a peer mediation event at a local elementary school. In short, to me they are more than programs, they are a governing philosophy.

Before finishing my statement, I would like to offer a few brief policy principles that I feel will assist in further developing the successes found in our programs:

- o To be successful violence prevention must be coordinated. We support looking at programs and equipment that will allow for greater coordination among local agencies in tracking and dealing with chronically and habitually disruptive students. According to the Public / Private Ventures Report, one of the keys to the success of YVRP has been the coordination among the many participating groups and agencies. That coordination could be even further enhanced through technology.

- o Students at risk to engage in violent acts benefit from specialized attention. Many of the students most likely to engage in violent acts can benefit from specialized attention. To deal with this issue, the District has created an eight week character education and counseling service for disruptive students. The goal of the program is to eliminate the need to suspend students who commit Level 1 offenses of the student code of conduct or who have experienced excessive absences or lateness. The program requires that parents participate in the Saturday program to learn strategies to assist their children in minimizing anti-social behavior, avoid conflicts, and improve communications skills. The program currently exists at 22 sites and is worth looking at by this Committee. Again, the YVRP report highlighted the specialized attention granted by individuals ranging from Parole Officers to Street Workers as being an essential element to the success of the program.

- o Students need constructive alternatives to violence. Summer and after-school programs provide a viable alternative to violence. There should be no doubt that the 40,000 students participating in the District's summer program or that the 28,000 students in after school programs are engaging in activities that keep them away from violence. However, viable alternatives are needed for those not in a specified program. Specifically, it is important to consider ways to get children involved in constructive alternatives to violence. One such way would be to provide funding mechanisms for summer training and employment. Through direct funds or tax credits, it is conceivable that children who are learning about topics and skills in school to take that knowledge and apply it through employment co-op and internship programs in the summer.

Finally, we have included additional information about many of the items discussed in my testimony in the binders that you have received. The binders also include information on successful programs in Boston and Chicago.

Thank you for allowing me to testify. I will be glad to answer any questions that you may have and I look forward to continuing to work with the committee on this important issue.