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Underreporting Hides Violence

Cases of students fighting, hitting teachers,
making threats are discovered much later.



SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer
Tamika McNeill drew a picture of herself after the attack. The boys who assaulted her were allowed to remain in school. "It was hard to walk past them," she said.

**BY SUSAN SNYDER, JOHN SULLIVAN, KRISTEN A. GRAHAM,
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Tamika McNeill, who had just turned 12, contemplated killing herself last April after classmates at Cleveland Elementary School grabbed her in the cafeteria, wedged their hands under her shirt, and tried to fondle her breasts.

"It made me feel like: End it all right there," said Tamika, then a sixth grader, who had been teased and taunted for months before the attack. "But I knew that it would make my family feel worse."

Administrators at the elementary school, in Tioga, didn't take the incident as seriously. They failed to report the assault to the district's central office, a violation of district policy, until 2 1/2 months later and permitted her attackers to stay in school.

"They didn't handle it the way they should

have," said Tamika's still-angry mother, Eloine, who with her daughter discussed the incident with reporters. "She had to endure a lot on top of being assaulted. . . . They [her attackers] were threatening to hurt her if she told the truth. They were threatening to jump her after school and her little sister."

A yearlong Inquirer investigation of violence in Philadelphia schools uncovered dozens of cases like Tamika's — 183 during the 2009-10 school year alone: Cases of students assaulting each other, punching teachers, kicking school police officers, and threatening to harm staff.

The incidents came to light — weeks or months later — only when city police issued arrest reports, prompting district officials to ask principals about them.

Teachers and union officials, meanwhile,

spoke of constant pressure from senior district and school administrators — sometimes subtle and unspoken, sometimes blatant — to hold down the reported numbers. At the same time Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman has been trumpeting a decrease in school violence.

“My officers are very frustrated out there because they’re being told not to report things and that everything must go through the principal,” said Michael Lodise, president of the school police union. “If they don’t want to report it, it doesn’t get reported.”

And when crimes aren’t reported, the public doesn’t get a true picture of school violence.

Lodise said the 183 cases had come to light only when city police made arrests.

Tamika’s mother said Cleveland administrators had told her they had a good reason for suppressing notification of the assault on her daughter: They didn’t want to disrupt students during state testing.

Ackerman said she was dismayed to hear the details.

“Where were the teachers? Where were the principals? If this had been dealt with at the school level — and I’m not trying to point fingers,” she said, then paused. “Getting to central office two months later puts her in harm’s way for a very long time.”

Principals get wide latitude

It wasn’t until June 22 that school police finally wrote a report about the Cleveland incident that stated: “School did not report this incident. . . . Spoke with AP [assistant principal] Renee Waring [sic]. Ms. Wearing was aware of the incident and thought it had been called into the ICU,” or incident control unit.

Wearing did not respond to telephone calls seeking comment.

School District policy says principals or their designees must report all serious incidents to the district’s central police office, where overall crime statistics are tabulated.

Yet district officials concede that not every incident has been properly recorded, and that Tamika’s case is an example. At the same time, they deny any pressure from district headquarters to under-report.

Deputy Mayor Everett Gillison said principals had long had broad latitude in running their schools. So, depending on the principal, schools vary widely on how they report and handle violence and

whether they call city police.

“There is a tension because some principals want to say, ‘I understand, and I think we can help,’ without involving the formal system,” said Gillison, who oversees city police. “What we’re saying is . . . it’s not necessarily going to hurt if that report is made.”

Ackerman also has said publicly that she doesn’t want a school-to-prison pipeline.

In the last year, Lodise said, there has been a noticeable change in whether incidents are reported to the city police: The district has increasingly left it to assault victims to press charges.

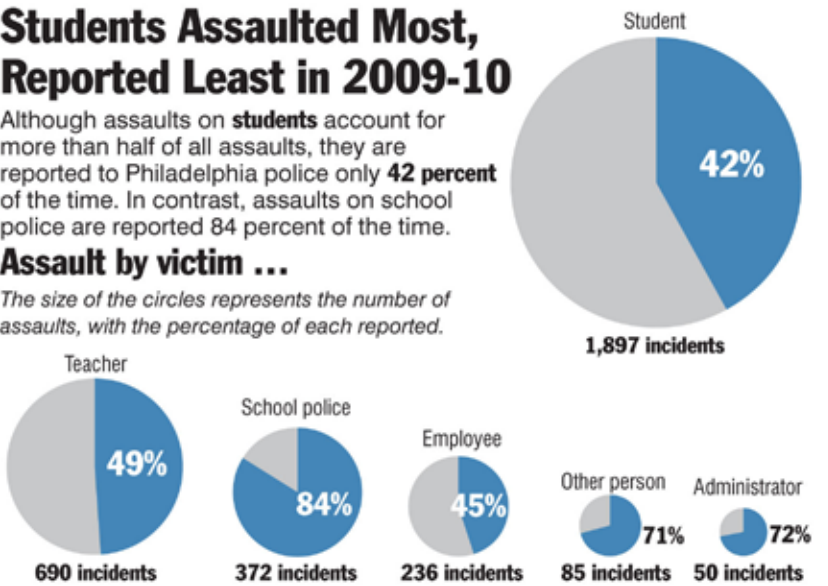
His 635-member force of full- and part-time officers is unarmed and generally does not make arrests, though it does detain suspects.

Students Assaulted Most, Reported Least in 2009-10

Although assaults on **students** account for more than half of all assaults, they are reported to Philadelphia police only **42 percent** of the time. In contrast, assaults on school police are reported 84 percent of the time.

Assault by victim ...

The size of the circles represents the number of assaults, with the percentage of each reported.



Reporting Assaults Varies by High School

The district’s 32 neighborhood schools, in 2009-10, varied widely in reporting assaults to Philadelphia police. Some schools notified police about most assaults, while others reported as few as three out of 10.

School	Total assaults 2009-10*	Percent reported to police
Most often contacted police ...		
Frankford	47	94%
Horace Furness	15	87
Overbrook	50	86
West Philadelphia	18	83
Charles Y. Audenried	27	81
George Washington	31	81
... and least often		
Olney West	48	50%
South Philadelphia	70	50
Strawberry Mansion	46	48
John Bartram	35	46
Kensington Business, Finance	19	37
Olney East	67	33

*Among schools that reported at least 10 assaults
SOURCES: School District of Philadelphia; Inquirer analysis

Theodore Roosevelt Middle School

District records show that serious incidents at the school were down 62 percent in 2009-10 from the previous year, but some teachers say they are discouraged from reporting.

Year	Enrollment	Assaults on teachers	Serious incidents	Serious incident rate per 100 students
2005-06	384	6	23	6.0
2006-07	386	5	25	6.5
2007-08	502	7	61	12.2
2008-09	386	14	49	12.7
2009-10	393	1	19	4.8

SOURCES: School District of Philadelphia; Inquirer analysis
MIKE PLACENTRA and DYLAN PURCELL / Staff Artist

Last month, in response to questions from The Inquirer, district spokeswoman Shana Kemp said: “Individuals who are assaulted, parents, students, teachers, and staff must file individual criminal charges. Not the school.”

One area that appears to be handled differently is aggravated assault. Under state law, assaults on teachers and other school personnel are automatically classified as aggravated assaults and are supposed to be reported to city police as a matter of course.

Last year, 690 cases of teacher assaults were documented. Yet the district directly notified police only half the time, according to district records. In some cases, teachers didn’t want to press charges, district officials said.

James B. Golden, the district’s former chief safety executive who was removed last summer after five years, said that when in charge, he had followed a simple rule:

Aggravated assaults — defined as causing “serious bodily injury” — were reported by school personnel to city police when the crime occurred in front of witnesses and could be documented.

The victims of simple assaults were directed to contact police on their own, he said.

Gillison similarly said that in clear cases of serious assaults, schools should contact city police and not leave that to the victims.

About 2 1/2 months after Inquirer reporters talked to Golden, Ackerman replaced him with a city police inspector, Myron Patterson, who reports to Ackerman and Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey.

She also asked the city police to help the district develop a uniform reporting system and, with Mayor Nutter, named a commission of top city officials that plans to make recommendations for the fall.

The new leadership arrangement was intended to get the district and city police to work more closely and cooperatively. But Gillison — to whom Ramsey reports — said some schools still were not contacting city police.

In an incident at M. Hall Stanton Elementary School in North Philadelphia on Oct. 26, principal Malika Brooks intervened to prevent a seventh-grade girl from arrest after she “intentionally struck” school Police Officer Robert Miller in the head with a telephone receiver and kicked him in a leg, according to the incident report filled out by school district police.

Miller, the report said, wanted to arrest the girl, but Brooks prohibited him from calling city police and pressing charges. Instead, the girl, 13, was suspended and taken home by a parent.

Brooks did not respond to a call seeking comment.

Gillison said the school had made a mistake — police should have been called.

Unreported incidents

By examining district data and school police incident reports for five years dating to the 2005-06 school year, The Inquirer identified numerous examples of tardy notification, failure to report, and statistical discrepancies pointing to the active suppression of information that would reveal how violent Philadelphia schools really are:

On June 14, 2010, a seventh-grade boy assaulted a female nonteaching aide at Feltonville Arts and Sciences Middle School. The assault was not reported until June 21. The principal told the control desk, “It was an oversight.”

On June 10, 2010, outside a classroom at Kenderton School in Tioga, a fourth grader punched a teacher in the face. The teacher suffered facial bruising, according to the school police report. Kenderton officials didn’t report the incident until 11 days later after a city Police Department report showed up.

On April 14, 2010, at Fairhill Elementary School, a girl reported that a classmate had grabbed her breasts in class. The assistant principal was told of the assault when it occurred but did not call city police or inform the principal. The school police officer, Jose Crespo, reported the incident nine days later. District spokeswoman Kemp said “personnel action” had been taken against the assistant principal for failing to report.

On March 29, 2010, a seventh grader assaulted a female teacher after hours at Locke School in West Philadelphia, but it wasn’t reported until April 19 when the district’s incident desk called the school. Kemp said the incident had happened before spring break and had been reported afterward, but the break began March 31 and concluded April 2.

The victim did not file a police report, and the student’s parents removed him from the school for the remainder of the school year, Kemp said.

Also March 29, four fifth graders robbed a classmate after dismissal just outside Pastorius School in East Germantown. A teacher saw the robbery, but the school failed to report it. It was recorded after the incident desk called the school April 8.

On Dec. 11, 2009, a ninth grader assaulted a 10th grader shortly before dismissal at Paul Robeson High School in North Philadelphia. The assault wasn’t reported until Jan. 15. “Principal believed it to be a mutual fight, and that fights are not to be reported,” the school police report noted. The principal suspended both students.

The Inquirer sought comment from principals at all of these schools, but only Robeson principal Hiromi Hernandez responded, disputing the account.

“We do an honest job,” she said. “We’re not trying to hide anything. That’s the truth.”

A former assistant U.S. attorney said that for years, the district had downplayed violence at the expense of the welfare of its students.



DAVID SWANSON / Staff Photographer

“IF THEY [THE PRINCIPALS] DON’T WANT TO REPORT IT, IT DOESN’T GET REPORTED.”

Michael Lodise, president of the Philadelphia school police officers union



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Jonathan Rojas looks at the finger broken during a school fight. School police told his mother that she would have to go to the police district to file charges. The attacker was suspended for two days, and mediation was held.

“You can’t address the problem until you’re honest about it,” said Jack Stollsteimer, who was a watchdog for violence in the Philadelphia district before the state eliminated the position in 2009. He doesn’t believe the district’s assertion that violence has declined and, now that his position is gone, said no one was there to hold school officials accountable.

“I don’t have any faith at all in what they say . . . and now that nobody’s watching, they can say whatever they want,” he said.

John Delaney, a deputy in the District Attorney’s Office, said district officials must measure violence accurately before they could assess the problem and plan for improvement. Delaney, former head of the trial division, is now the office’s liaison to the schools.

The School District is “an institution that lives and dies on report cards,” he said. “The kids who go there, their progress or lack of progress is measured and reported. . . . Well, the goal should be that every school should be safe.”

Is violence declining?

While district officials continue to tout a decline in violent incidents the last two years, teachers, union officials, and school police officers say their daily experiences contradict the numbers.

“If there is a drop, people don’t feel it in the buildings,” Jerry Jordan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, said last summer.

At a September meeting of the School Reform Commission, which oversees city schools, the district introduced a new safety effort with a goal of reducing the schools on the state’s “persistently dangerous” list from 19 to zero in two years. That would be a historic achievement; the district has never had fewer than nine. Some schools have been on the list for nearly a decade.

Those on the front lines read that goal as putting more pressure on schools not to report crimes.

Lodise scoffed at the notion that crime could

be reduced so significantly at these schools: “How do you do that?” he asked. “If it’s an assault, it’s an assault.”

Teachers regularly complain that school officials need to deal more aggressively with the behavior that causes the problems.

“There’s zero follow-through on anything,” said a teacher at Roosevelt Middle School in East Germantown, who like many teachers interviewed, feared retribution if named. “We’ve had kids hit teachers and not gotten suspended. . . . Nothing happens.”

Keith Newman said he had been orally reprimanded for calling 911 when a fight involving 50 students broke out after school outside Morrison Elementary, where he previously taught.

“My principal came along, and he helped me break it up,” Newman said. “Afterward, he reamed me out for calling 911. He said, ‘Only the principal can call 911.’”

That principal was Christopher Byrd, who became principal of Cleveland this school year, after Tamika left the school.

Tomás Hanna, an associate superintendent, said any employee could call 911 if a crime was committed. “There’s no having to clear it through the principal,” he said. “That is totally unacceptable.”

Anger at school response

Robin Taylor Sr. is one parent outraged at the lack of response by schools.

Taylor, a U.S. customs officer, faulted Sayre High School in West Philadelphia for the handling of his daughter Amber’s injury. He said the principal hadn’t called an ambulance for Amber, then 16, who suffered a broken arm and wrist when she inadvertently got in the middle of a fight between other students.

Amber, a sophomore, was on her way out of class when a fight broke out just outside the room Nov. 9, her father said. A male student threw a girl into the door, which swung open and violently struck Amber, causing the injury.

Linda Taylor, Amber’s mother, said she had first received a phone call from principal Khalia Ames telling her to meet Ames and Amber at a

hospital. Soon after, she said, Ames called again, asking how far away Linda Taylor was and saying she wasn't calling an ambulance. Instead, Taylor had to pick up Amber at school and take her to the hospital herself.

Ames declined to comment, and Kemp, the district spokeswoman, denied that the principal had refused to call an ambulance.

Amber did not report violence against her on the day of the incident, Kemp said.

The next day she returned to school with her parents and said a boy had slammed her arm in the door, Kemp said.

In a meeting with Amber's parents and the other students and their parents, Amber said all the students had been "taunting" each other, according to Kemp. One of the students was moved to another class, a solution that satisfied the parents, Kemp said.

Robin and Linda Taylor disputed Kemp's account, particularly the fact that they had waited a day to report the incident. If Ames had called her the day Amber was injured, Linda Taylor said, how could she not have known about the incident?

'It's up to the parents'

Roberta Foxwell was angered that Woodrow Wilson Middle School in the Northeast failed to call city police to report an assault on her son, Jonathan Rojas, the day it occurred in October.

Rojas, a seventh grader, suffered a broken finger when another student assaulted him in the first-floor hallway, she said. The boy swung and missed, and when Rojas swung back in self-defense, the boy grabbed his hand and bent back his fingers, Rojas said.

His mother had to go to police and press charges.

"They told me they don't get involved with the police," she said. "It's up to the parents to do what they have to do."

District spokeswoman Kemp said that police had been called the day after the incident, and that school police had told Foxwell that she would have to go to the police district to file the charges. Rojas' attacker was suspended for two days, and mediation was held between the families, Kemp said.

Pressure to keep quiet

When incidents climb at a school, principals get pressure, too, from regional bosses and other administrators.

"My administration used to be very strict with discipline," said Jennifer Freeman, an English teacher and union representative at Martin Luther King High School in East Germantown. "This year, they're afraid for their jobs. They're being told things, and they're laxing up. They don't want to suspend. They don't want to have a high failure rate. The climate in my building is changing."

Teachers at King say assaults and threats against them are mounting and not being taken seriously.

This fall, a student hurled a clipboard at a teacher but received only a one-day suspension, said Freeman.

"The teacher was told it's not an assault because [it] didn't hit you," she said.

At the end of last school year, a teacher

accidentally opened a set of double doors and bumped a student, Freeman said. The student became irate and attacked the teacher. Administrators at King said it wasn't an assault because the teacher had "provoked" the student by bumping him with the door first, Freeman said.

Former King principal Kristina Diviny, who left her job in January to become principal of Christiana High School in Delaware, said that when serious violence had occurred, students had been disciplined on her watch and incidents reported.

"I'm never willing to sacrifice our climate for numbers," she said.

Michael Lerner, recently retired head of the district's principals union, said his members face difficult situations every day.

He cited an example: A fight breaks out. The loser alleges he or she was assaulted. Is it an assault?

Or perhaps an employee "provokes" an assault by a child, he said. Or maybe a child has learning or emotional disabilities.

"It isn't all that simple," he said. "There are so many mitigating factors in many of these cases that it isn't black and white. It is a very, very difficult position for many principals. I know for the most part they do report."

Surprised at the data

Some schools showed a dramatic reduction in serious incidents during the last school year. Interviews with teachers at those schools and an examination of other records show discrepancies.

Roosevelt Middle School was among the most improved schools from 2008-09 to 2009-10. Its serious incidents dropped from 49 to 19.

But four teachers, who met with an Inquirer reporter on condition of anonymity, said administrators routinely discouraged reporting of incidents and downplayed their seriousness.

"In the classroom, kids can curse at us, throw things, and fight, and nothing happens to them," one teacher said.

"We're told it's . . . a matter of classroom management," said another. "We're told, 'Fix it yourself.'"

Hanna, the district associate superintendent, however, attributed the improvement to new "behavior-support" programs and to principal Stefanie Ressler, who has been there for several years. Ressler did not return calls for comment.

Harding Middle School in Frankford, which came off the persistently dangerous list in 2009-10, also was among the most improved in the entire district. Its incidents were cut by more than half, from 93 to 42 in 2010.

"I'm surprised at the data," said Lisa Haver, who taught at Harding last year and has since retired from the district. "I didn't see any drop in violent incidents. It seemed to be the same as the previous years."

The School District keeps separate compilations of incidents and suspensions. A comparison of the data for 2009-10 reveals inconsistencies, raising questions about how accurately information is reported.

For example, Carnell Elementary in Oxford Circle reported 17 suspensions for sex acts through May 31, but noted four morals offenses.

Richmond Elementary in Port Richmond cited 15 suspensions for sex acts but only two morals offenses, and 10 suspensions for weapons but only one weapons incident.

District officials offered no explanation for Carnell. At Richmond, spokesman Fernando Gallard said, information was entered incorrectly into the computer.

Olney High School West and Olney High School East share a building, draw from the same neighborhood, and have almost the same enrollment — about 900 in 2009-10.

Yet East reported 102 serious incidents last year, 31 percent more than West, with 78.

Several educators at both schools said administrators on the West side underreported incidents and were more lax with discipline.

The district in 2005 split the building, one of its most disruptive and academically troubled high schools, into two schools with a wall down the middle. They hoped smaller settings would lead to improvement.

The new Olneys didn't qualify for the persistently dangerous list because schools must have at least two years of data to qualify for the list. They have since returned.

Reporting the incidents

For years, the district has struggled with how to report crime consistently and fairly.

A case at Sharswood Elementary in South Philadelphia in January 2008 illustrates how one incident and a directive from the central office can significantly influence the level of reported violence.

The principal failed to report an attack on an eighth-grade girl in an anti-bullying class, which spurred a crackdown on reporting by the administration. The result was a spike in reported incidents that has not been matched in any other year during the last decade.

"The principals said: 'You want reporting? We'll give you reporting,'" said Golden, the former school safety chief.

Sometimes teachers report incidents that seem more like horseplay, said Benjamin Wright, the district's assistant superintendent of alternative education.

He cited a case of an elementary student who dropped a play cell phone. When a teacher confiscated it, he grabbed her wrist.

"She called 911," Wright said. "That kind of stuff doesn't fly with me."

He also maintained that it's not an assault if a teacher is inadvertently struck breaking up a fight.

Tamika's struggles

Tamika, the student who was groped by classmates in the Cleveland cafeteria, had become a routine target for classmates. They teased her about her training bra and made fun of her because she is underdeveloped for her age, her family said.

A boy put her in a headlock during writing class, punched her, and broke her glasses.

A student grabbed the glasses off Tamika's 8-year-old sister and stomped on them after finding out the girls are related.

Once, students followed Tamika and her mother home from school. "I don't care if she's with her mom," Eloiine McNeill recalled them

saying, "I'll walk up and punch that bitch in her face."

McNeill, 39, said she had spun around on her heels.

"That's it. This will be the last time," she told them. "If you hit my child, you're going to get the whooping you should have got at home."

They just laughed, McNeill said.

The worst abuse happened in early April when Tamika went into the cafeteria. She had sensed something was wrong because students were staring at her.

So she wore her backpack on her chest for protection.

"Bra stuffer. Bra stuffer," she heard someone yell.

Then several students came at her. A boy tried to wrestle her knapsack away. He held her hands behind her back, she said. Two other students wedged their hands between the backpack and her body, one going up her shirt and the other going down in it.

They grabbed her chest, as she yelled for them to stop.

Tamika pulled away and ran into a bathroom. She collapsed to the floor, crying, she said.

A female school police officer who had followed her in asked what was wrong.

She said she didn't feel she could trust anyone. The teasing had gone on for too long. Tamika and her mother said they had complained to school workers about the problems at least a half-dozen times.

As soon as the officer left, Tamika ran home — the one place she felt safe. Her mother wasn't home, so Tamika called her on the phone, sobbing as she relayed what happened.

While waiting for her mother, she drew a picture of a face, tears streaming down it, and wrote a poem:

In the schools, they're always bothering me.

But if they just take the time to see how much of a good friend I can be.

I'm smart and I'm really fun, and I like to play and you can speak to me all day.

But no one wants to talk to me.

No one wants to say hi unless they're saying bye girl, please or goodbye.

I just hope one day I'll have a friend I can trust, but I hope it's soon because I think I might combust.

When she heard what had happened, Eloiine McNeill called city police and returned to school with Tamika that afternoon to register a complaint. Police met them at the school.

She was dismayed to find that no one at Cleveland had even noticed Tamika was gone, though an hour had passed:

"I said, 'Did her teacher call downstairs to say one of her students didn't return from lunch?' None of that occurred."

In the days after the attack, the school didn't remove Tamika's attackers from her classes or stop them from harassing the girl, McNeill said.

Nor did it notify district officials at the central office — that wouldn't happen for 2 1/2 months.

City police from the Special Victims Unit took Tamika's complaint on April 9 but didn't interview witnesses until April 22.

Near the end of the school year — about two months after the assault — the school organized a meeting for Tamika and her mother with the

attackers and their parents in an effort at reconciliation.

About the same time, arrest warrants for two boys — fellow sixth graders — were finally issued, one in June and the other in July.

Under a “consent decree,” the students were ordered to perform 25 hours of community service, spend time with a court-appointed advocate, follow a curfew, and submit to random drug screens, according to court officials.

The drawn-out process was an ordeal for Tamika. She stopped going out for recess because her mother was too worried. Instead, she sat in the school office. She never wanted to

take her coat off. She felt “violated,” she said.

The bright girl who had a knack for drawing began to like school less. She would cry frequently, wondering why the classmates who attacked her were allowed to remain in school.

“It was hard to walk past them,” she said softly.

Tamika, now a seventh grader, has since moved to Kenderton School, which is only a slightly longer walk than Cleveland, and she’s happier.

“The word needs to get out on how violent the schools really are,” her mother said, “and they really need to take it seriously.”