Punching, kicking, and pulling out hair, the 10 girls attacked one another in a brutal battle that erupted seconds after an exchange of words outside Bridget Finnegan’s third-period Spanish class at Martin Luther King High.

Concerned that a pregnant girl was caught in the middle of the March 30 melee, Finnegan waded into the confused and noisy disturbance, pulling apart combatants who continued to yank on each other’s hair. One girl had been kicked in the head and was bleeding from the cut, she said. Another was whacked in the face, her glasses shattered. Others showed bruising and signs of battering.

About a week earlier at Overbrook High School, 17-year-old Montez Wilmer was injured so badly during a scuffle with another student that he had a seizure and eventually spent four nights in a hospital, undergoing surgery for a broken eye socket. “My whole life flashed before my eyes,” he said from the hospital.

Yet, as far as the School District of Philadelphia was concerned, neither event registered among the legion of violent incidents it records each year — 4,541 alone during the 2009-10 school year.

A continuing Inquirer investigation into violence in Philadelphia public schools shows that another tier of incidents — coded as “fighting,”
“disorderly conduct,” or “minor alteration” — can also involve violence and result in serious injury, suggesting that city schools are even more dangerous than the district portrays.

Though data for the current school year are unavailable, there were nearly 3,000 cases in this lower spectrum during the 2009-10 school year, according to a state report using district data. There were 1,040 reported incidents of disorderly conduct, 928 incidents coded as fighting, and 959 minor altercations.

The King and Overbrook incidents were coded as disorderly conduct (fighting). How many of the other cases reached the same level of violence is unknown. The district does not make reports public, citing confidential student information.

Moreover, some violent incidents may not be reported at all — or for some reason aren’t recorded by the central office, casting doubt on the reliability of the district’s reporting system.

Asked about the March 30 fight outside Finnegan’s room at King, the district initially said it had no record of the incident. City police also had no record.

Asked again last week, district spokeswoman Shana Kemp finally said on Wednesday that she had tracked down a report of a fight outside King Classroom 106, which seemed to fit the time and location.

The March 25 Overbrook case was reported on time.

Under the district’s violence index, disorderly conduct, fights, and minor altercations do not qualify as “violent” or “serious” incidents, nor are they counted when compiling which schools are “persistently dangerous” under federal law and state guidelines. In Pennsylvania, only aggravated assaults, sexual assaults, robberies, and weapon possessions for which there are confirmed arrests count toward determining whether a school is persistently dangerous.

Avoiding the persistently dangerous designation is a point of pride in Philadelphia, where 19 schools are on the list. Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman has a stated goal of reducing that number to zero, and an extra arrest or two at a school like King — long plagued by truancy, low test scores, and violence — can tip the balance.

In recent weeks, Rhonda H. Lauer, chief executive officer of Foundations Inc. — the New Jersey nonprofit that ran a jobs program, developed an urban farm, and provided other services to King at a cost of up to $600,000 a year — boasted that the school had not been on the list since 2007-08 and said that was one of the reasons her company should be able to run King as a charter.

For the 128 teachers and 1,100 students at King, the reality can seem quite different.

“I’m not blaming any one source, but to not classify what happened outside my room as anything other than a serious incident is a disgrace,” Finnegan said.

Indeed, teachers say March 30 was a day when violence ruled at King, in the city’s East Germantown neighborhood. There were multiple fights — the school district has acknowledged at least four — plus a fire, a 45-minute evacuation, and an hourlong lockdown during which teachers and students were unable to leave their classrooms. All told, 24 students were suspended for fighting.

The tumultuous day came as The Inquirer was in the middle of publishing its seven-part series “Assault on Learning,” which found serious violence in city schools and widespread underreporting of incidents. The March 31 installment focused on King, and documented how Ackerman’s signature intervention program — and enrolling about 90 percent of the King student body in it — had failed to stem violence or put students on the right course academically.

Yet by the district’s official calculations, nothing violent was going on at King on March 30 — with the exception of the fire.

The day began with the fire alarm interrupting a state standardized science test, according to a King teacher who wrote a graphic chronicle of what happened and shared it with The Inquirer. (The teacher asked not to be named, fearing retribution.)

The fire was in a locker, and the school was evacuated for 45 minutes while it was extinguished, according to the account.

Also during the day, there were at least six “rather violent fights,” some of them bloody, the teacher wrote.

The melee outside Finnegan’s room happened about 11:30 a.m. She said one of her students exchanged words with three other girls. Then, as Finnegan directed the student into class, the girl pulled her hood over her head and knotted the drawstring.

The fight was on.

Students streamed out from classrooms and joined the fracas, while teachers tried to pull the brawling students apart, Finnegan said.

“I think the incident was serious,” Finnegan said. Aside from the visible injuries, she worried that “the damage that you can’t see . . . can be more serious. Anyone could have experienced a concussion or a strained neck.”

Finnegan called security, but officers were slow to arrive because they were involved in quelling other outbreaks in the school, she said. When security staff showed up, they took six girls to the school police office, picking up a seventh later, Finnegan said.

King’s interim principal, James Murray, did not return a call for comment.

About an hour later in the first-floor lunchroom, another brawl broke out, involving more than a dozen students, teachers said. Five were suspended in that fracas.

The violence was so alarming the school was locked down, forcing teachers to keep students in their classrooms for more than an hour, teachers said.

Combined with the fire evacuation, that meant King students lost nearly two hours of class time that day.

“One of the school police officers, after the last of the big fights, sat outside smoking, pointing out the blood stains on his uniform, mentioning the names of the several individuals who created this gruesome collage,” the teacher wrote.

Jennifer Freeman — an English teacher who is the teachers union representative at King — said there were other “scattered” fights at King that day. None was as serious as those outside Finnegan’s room and in the cafeteria.
She disagreed with the district’s decision not to code some of the incidents as “serious” or “violent.”

“If a fight is bad enough that we have to go on lockdown to get back in order, how is that not a serious incident?” she asked.

But it was coded in the school police report as “disorderly conduct (fighting).”

According to the school police report The Inquirer obtained, it happened at 12:45 p.m. in the first-floor lunchroom and involved five students “who did not belong in the lunchroom.”

There were no serious injuries, Kemp said. When first asked about the March 30 incidents, the district mentioned only the lunchroom fight and the locker fire. Later, it acknowledged a second fight involving two boys, both of whom were suspended.

Pressed again about the fight outside Finnegan’s room, Kemp said the district would take a closer look. On Wednesday, she said there were four fights that day, resulting in the 24 suspensions.

All the incidents were reported by the school on the day they occurred, she said, blaming a glitch on the central office’s failing to record them. “We don’t know why it [the central office report] hadn’t updated,” she said. “They’re looking to figure that out.”

Adding the newly discovered fights, King has reported 92 violent and nonviolent incidents this school year, down from previous years.

Teachers, however, say that what happened on March 30 is a perfect example of why the district’s claim of declining violence lacks credibility.

Though none of the events was classified as violent, they were evidence of worsening conditions at King, Freeman said: “They’ve gotten progressively worse as the year went on, and a lot of that is because of the whole turmoil of the school.”

King has been at the heart of a political battle around underperforming schools. At stake was the running to operate King next year under the district’s Renaissance program, meant to turn around underperforming schools. At stake was a five-year contract worth at least $50 million.

The withdrawals came amid charges of conflict of interest and political wrangling involving School Reform Commission Chairman Robert L. Archie Jr., whose law firm previously represented Foundations, and State Rep. Dwight Evans (D., Phila.), a longtime supporter of the nonprofit and recipient of $80,000 in campaign contributions from its executives.

Mayor Nutter launched a city investigation into the campaign contributions from its executives. Democratic School Reform Commission Chairman Turner-Johnson was angry that the district didn’t deem the incident an assault on her son.

“Maybe they’re acting out,” Freeman said. “It’s no wonder they’re displaying these behaviors.”

**Fight at Overbrook**

Montez Wilmer, 17, thought he was going to die on March 25 in the hallway outside the cafeteria at Overbrook High. He hadn’t had a seizure before and didn’t know what was happening to him.

Wilmer spoke from his room at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia four days later, his eye stitched closed after doctors repaired his broken eye socket. They also treated him for a concussion.

The tussle started as a verbal spat in the lunchroom. Wilmer, a junior, was talking with friends when someone told the other boy that Wilmer was talking about him. The boy came over and got in Wilmer’s face, Wilmer said.

“I kept pushing him away,” said Wilmer, a husky, 5-foot-11 football player. “One of the lunchroom ladies broke it up.”

When lunch was over, someone told the boy that Wilmer was going to slap him, which Wilmer denied.

“He threw his hands up at me like we were going to fight,” Wilmer said. “So I threw mine up.”

The boy swung at him, Wilmer said, adding that he jumped to avoid being hit.

Witnesses agree that Wilmer took a swing back at the other boy, missed, lost his balance and fell to the floor. He cracked his head on the wall and started bleeding.

While on his knees and trying to get up — he and his mother say — his opponent, also 17, punched him in the face with a closed fist.

“I started bleeding, and when I was trying to get up he punched me . . . and that’s when I went into a seizure,” Wilmer said.

Philadelphia School District officials counter that there was no punch — just a fall — that happened during a mutual fight. Both students were suspended for five days, and the incident was properly coded, Kemp maintained.

“The academy leader [a teacher] saw the whole thing,” Kemp said. Academy leaders are teachers who oversee groups of students.

A female student, whose parents asked that she not be named, corroborated Wilmer’s story, however. She said she saw the other boy punch Wilmer when he was on the floor and that’s when Wilmer went into the seizure.

Wilmer’s mother, Christina Turner-Johnson, 42, an employee of the Philadelphia Water Department, got the news on her cellphone. A student called her best friend, and the friend called her.

She rushed to the school and found her son being treated by paramedics. No principal or school official had called to tell her what happened, she said.

“I was hysterical. There was blood everywhere,” Turner-Johnson said. “He had a four- or five-minute seizure. He could have gone into a coma. He could have died.”

At the hospital, surgeons put a plate in Wilmer’s face, she said. Without it, doctors told her, his eye would sink when it healed. He also was treated for a concussion.

Turner-Johnson was angry that the district didn’t deem the incident an assault on her son.
She and Wilmer have since gone to police and pressed charges. City police are investigating, a police spokeswoman said.

It wasn't the first time her son faced trouble at Overbrook. There was an altercation last year and her daughter Angelique, now 20, suffered a fractured nose when she went to Wilmer's aid, Turner-Johnson said.

Earlier this school year, Overbrook officials told her they thought Wilmer was associating with a gang, she said. She told them the boys were part of a dance group, not a gang, she said.

“He’s friends with a couple of them,” she said.

On April 7, Wilmer and Angelique were at a neighborhood recreation center when they were confronted by family members of the boy in the tussle two weeks earlier, Turner-Johnson said. There was a physical scuffle.

Wilmer returned to classes at Overbrook on April 11. Teens went after him again at the recreation center after school that day, his mother said. One of the boy's cousins hit him in the back of the head on the side of his face where the plate was implanted, she said.

Turner-Johnson said she was seeking a transfer to another school for her son, who wants to be an architect. But for now, Wilmer has returned to Overbrook for half-days.

“This,” she said, “really is getting out of hand.”