



## New team takes on school violence

**Special Report:** The districts new leaders, city and school police, and others are tackling the problem. Violence is still too high, officials say, but some steps are working.



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer  
Officer Andrew G. Prosser patrols a hallway at Overbrook High.

BY SUSAN SNYDER | INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The school day was well under way when the fight between two boys broke out on the fourth floor of Overbrook High School: A 17-year-old walking to class was punched multiple times by a younger boy.

At first, the unarmed school police officers who intervened didn't think the incident was serious enough to summon city police — they were planning to classify it as a fight or disorderly conduct.

But the school nurse called an ambulance because she believed the victim's nose was broken. The emergency call triggered notification of city police, who have the power to make arrests, and they coded the incident as an aggravated assault.

The Nov. 29 fracas is typical of the violence plaguing Philadelphia public schools, as documented in The Inquirer's seven-part series, "Assault on Learning." And it shows how intractable the problem can be, even as the School District's newly installed leadership confronts the severity of the situation and has begun taking a variety of steps to accurately document violent incidents and curtail them.

For Pedro Ramos, the new chairman of the School Reform Commission, making schools safe places to learn is "a threshold issue."

"Without it," he said, "you don't get to

anything else. Safety will determine whether people even come through your door."

Some school and city officials believe that Overbrook — patrolled by eight unarmed school officers as the first line of defense, with two armed city police officers often on the premises and on call — can serve as a model for how city and school police can work together to improve safety, while allowing for discretion as to whether to make an arrest.

Everett Gillison, Mayor Nutter's chief of staff who oversees policing in the city, spoke especially of the rapport the city officers have forged with some Overbrook students as something to be emulated in other schools where city police are deemed necessary.

Yet even the level of policing at Overbrook and rapport-building has not stopped assaults such as the one that sent the bloodied teen to the hospital. It was one of two recorded at the school that day — and in both incidents school police were the first responders with city police summoned later.

By design, city police "don't engage too much," said Overbrook principal Ethelyn Payne Young, generally staying on the five-story school's first floor, tracking truants among other tasks. "If they get out there too much, they're mandated by the role to make arrests."



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer

**Vonie Witts, who monitors security cameras at Overbrook, talks with Officer Andrew G. Prosser, assigned to the school four years ago. Prosser says he spends about 80 percent of his workday inside the school.**

### Test-drive phase

The Inquirer’s series documented more than 30,000 serious incidents in the schools over five years, and violence still flares in the 146,000-student district, public officials agree.

The district has turned four of its most violent high schools — Audenried, Olney East and West, and Gratz — over to private operators and no longer counts them in its statistics, which it admitted had lacked credibility. As The Inquirer’s series showed, schools were underreporting serious incidents, some of which had resulted in arrests.

The School District is taking several steps to report violence more reliably, but is still in the test-drive phase.

This fall, the district changed its crime-reporting system, vesting authority in its 436-member school police force rather than principals, and on Friday, began year-to-date postings of serious incidents for each school on its website.

“It’s transparency,” Chief Inspector Myron Patterson, who oversees the school police, said in an interview Monday. Posting will allow outside parties to more easily monitor whether all incidents are being recorded.

How to classify an incident is still subject to broad discretion — the Overbrook fracas is an example — with real impact on school statistics. An assault is considered a serious incident, and too many confirmed arrests for violence can give a school the stigma of appearing on the state’s “persistently dangerous” list.

Overbrook came off the list for the first time this fall, based on a drop in such arrests during the 2010-11 school year.

Disorderly-conduct charges aren’t viewed as seriously, but result in arrest, while a fight may simply lead to discipline meted out by the school.

The incident at Overbrook was eventually

coded as an assault because of the severity of the injury.

As Ramos helps reshape the SRC — four of its five members have been appointed in recent months — he and fellow commissioners have created a special committee to focus on safety across a broad spectrum of issues, including policing.

“The focus on just the police part of it is an element, but it’s not enough,” said Ramos, a lawyer. “It’s clear to me that the new SRC wants to see a clear, comprehensive, well-articulated vision and strategy around school climate and safety.”

The district also has a new acting superintendent, Leroy Nunery II, appointed after Arlene C. Ackerman was ousted in the summer. During her three-year watch, Ackerman was accused of minimizing school violence, including racial attacks on Asian students at South Philadelphia High School that led to federal intervention.

“My watchword has been to execute in terms of school safety,” Nunery said in an interview last week. “We can lay out all the great plans . . . but if you don’t execute each and every step and try to correct whatever flaws are in the system, talking to each other from a planning standpoint won’t get us where we need to be.”

This month, the state appointed a safety watchdog to advocate for victims of violence in the city’s schools — a position reinstated this summer after being vacant and unfunded by the legislature for more than two years.

Changes also are planned for how school police officers are screened. Gillison, the mayor’s chief of staff, said Wednesday that an upgrade in training would be recommended. Also being looked at as a possibility is an expansion in the deployment of city police officers in schools — an idea Nutter and Police Commissioner Charles H. Ramsey broached in April, days after the series ran.

**“If you need an armed police officer in the school, there’s a lot wrong with the school climate.”**

**Shelly Yanoff**

executive director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth

The Inquirer's investigation showed that on any given day, 25 students, teachers, or other staffers were beaten, robbed, sexually assaulted, or became victims of other violent crimes.

Additional stories explored other safety-related problems — malfunctioning security cameras that aren't monitored, poorly developed school plans to improve the most dangerous schools, assaults downgraded to lesser offenses, and a poorly screened and undertrained School District police force that resulted, in one case, in the hiring of an admitted drug addict.

On the first day of school this year, that officer appeared at a court hearing on a drug charge wearing her police uniform. She has been laid off.

Ramos said the series provided “a good exploration of a lot of the issues you will have to get through to get a good comprehensive strategy.” But, he added, “it's really hard to find a silver bullet.”

Even before the series was published — but after The Inquirer's investigation was well under way — Nutter and Ackerman appointed a blue-ribbon commission on school safety. The creation of the panel followed the attacks at South Philadelphia High, the impetus for the newspaper's investigation.

A draft report by that commission obtained by The Inquirer in September contained many of the same findings as the newspaper's series, including an inconsistent crime-reporting system.

With the state's appointment of Kelley Hodge, a former prosecutor, as the new safety watchdog, victims of crime will once again have an advocate in the city's public schools.

Jack Stollsteimer, a former assistant U.S. attorney who previously held the position, was cautiously optimistic. He had been highly critical of the district's handling of violence during his tenure.

“It should make a difference in that there is at least somebody watching this issue besides The Philadelphia Inquirer,” Stollsteimer said upon hearing of the new appointment.

## **Disciplinary issues**

The district also is taking a “deeper look” at its Comprehensive Student Assistance Process, its main intervention to stave off students' deteriorating grades and behavior, said Nunery. The series found the process in many cases was little more than paper shuffling and enrolled nearly a third of the district's students, even though there weren't enough resources to provide help.

The district has had discussions with juvenile court officials and the Department of Human Services to figure out ways to better coordinate services and ensure students are actually getting help, Nunery said.

In addition, Gillison said he planned to recommend to the district that it increase screening requirements for school police and upgrade training, including requiring them to attend the police academy for 32 weeks, as city police do.

The Inquirer found that more than a dozen of the district's officers had arrest records, and many of them also faced disciplinary issues on the job. School officers are given only four weeks of training — as opposed to city police, who must graduate from the police academy's

32-week program — and are not drug-tested or psychologically screened.

The district will begin more intensive background investigations of potential hires with the next new class of recruits, Patterson said. As part of the screening, investigators from the office of school safety will go into the applicant's neighborhood and interview acquaintances to determine if the applicant is suited for the job, he said.

The school police department's representative on the hiring panel also will make sure appropriate questions are asked of candidates to see if they are suitable for the job, Patterson said.

Drug-testing potential hires will be an issue for union negotiations, Patterson said. The current contract expires in 2013.

However, Michael Lodise, president of the officers union, said there's no reason to wait. He said drug testing was needed and he is ready to sit down and work out an agreement with the district.

Patterson said that the district also would rely heavily on new legislation that requires current and prospective employees to disclose previous arrests.

As for training, the district this fall began giving 20 to 30 officers per week additional training in district policies, weapon scanning, handcuffing procedures, and other areas, Patterson said. It had hoped to train more officers this year, but had to scale back because of budget cuts.

“We're working with the dynamic of limited resources,” he said.

The district recently announced another round of layoffs as it works to close a \$629 million budget gap.

Asked whether he supported having school officers attend the police academy, Ramos said that while better screening was “common sense” and more training was desirable, he's not sure police academy training is the right kind.

“Before you decide on that tactic, you should have a [safety] strategy,” he said.

Patterson's department also “reinforced” its policy to require school personnel to monitor safety cameras in schools where the district made a significant investment in technology.

The blue-ribbon commission's report has not been released, but some of its findings — such as the change in the reporting system — already have been implemented. The final plan will be released within a couple of months after review by the new School Reform Commission, Nunery said.

The SRC also designated one of its four new standing committees to focus on safety and school climate. Ramos said the attention should make it clear that the district considers the issue of primary importance.

Commission member Lorene Cary, a novelist and creative-writing instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, will head the safety committee, which will convene early next year. In a recent interview, she said the committee at first would focus on “prevention” and finding ways to make schools more attractive and interesting to students.

“I don't want to say that straight-up security

and school policing isn't part of the issue," she said. "But I want to look at other things that we can effect very quickly."

Nunery said the district needed help from the community: "We can't do it ourselves, or only by ourselves."

Kay Kyungsun Yu, chair of the Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations, which released a report and recommendations in the aftermath of the South Philadelphia High case, said the district's new leadership had been more open to working on solutions. District leadership already has accepted the commission's guidance in securing help from other agencies, she said.

"It was nice to be able to know that all the findings and recommendations contained in the report were being taken seriously by the district," she said.

### **Armed officers?**

Shortly after the school-violence series concluded in April, Ramsey and Nutter said through a spokesman that they were exploring putting armed police officers in some city schools as part of a comprehensive strategy.

"There's no question, that's where they'd like to go," Mark McDonald, the mayor's press secretary, said at that time.

Both McDonald and Karima Zedan, Ramsey's spokeswoman, said discussions were "preliminary" and "in the earliest of stages." At the time, they noted that officers already were assigned to patrol areas in and around schools.

"This would be an expansion of services," Zedan said at the time, "and collaboration between the district and department."

Since then, Nutter and Ramsey have been emphasizing that armed city officers already have a significant presence in the schools and it's been so for decades.

The current setup was put in place when Ramsey arrived four years ago, they said at a news conference last month. A total of 16 officers are stationed at some of the district's 249 schools, though they are attached to police districts and at times perform other police work. An additional 24 are responsible for multiple school buildings and split their time. Forty more work as backup school officers, helping with arrival and dismissal and addressing truancy.

Nutter said the district and city "will collaboratively make any other plans . . . on whether the program will be expanded on an as-needed basis."

How that expansion would occur, what model it would follow, and how it would be paid for are all questions that need to be explored by the city and School District, Gillison said in an interview last week.

"We are in a tight budget situation," he noted.

Jerry Jordan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, was surprised — but happy — to hear that some city police are based in schools. He recalled having officers at University City High School in the 1970s, but then losing them to budget cuts.

"They were people the kids could trust and depend on," he said. "As we raise our kids, we teach them police officers are our friends."

Shelly Yanoff, executive director of Public Citizens for Children and Youth, at first said she was surprised to hear that armed officers were stationed in schools. But upon hearing how they were deployed, she said she was fine with it as long as school officials maintained control of safety and there was no uniform policy on deploying officers.

"It's not a policy that has them controlling school discipline," she said. "They should not be an intrusive presence. School people should be in charge of their climate."

### **Hands on at Overbrook**

City officers vary in the time they spend inside schools and at times are pulled for other assignments. For example, the day after the Overbrook assault, the city police officer assigned to the school was redeployed to focus on Occupy Philadelphia protesters.

"They are in when they have to be. They're out when they have to be out," said Sal Fede, an administrative sergeant in the 19th Police District, which includes Overbrook.

The goal during the school year is to keep them there all the time, Fede said.

Commanding officers at the 19th District say Officers Gregory West and Andrew G. Prosser, who are stationed at Overbrook, are the most "hands-on" in that district and probably the city.

They have an office in the 1,158-student building and have developed positive relationships with many of the students.

The 19th District also has officers stationed at Lamberton, a K-12 building, and starting this year at Beeber Middle School.

West said he was assigned to Overbrook in 2001. Prosser has been there four years.

Prosser said he spent about 80 percent of his workday inside Overbrook. He estimates he is asked to respond to calls outside the building about three times a week.

"Our situation is so unique that [school administrators and school police officers] are always asking for us to come to their school to set up," Prosser said.

Prosser, 44, a native of West Philadelphia and a School District graduate, begins his day at 19th District headquarters, where he picks up his equipment and checks in.

Like other city police officers, he carries a gun, a taser, pepper spray, baton, utility knife, and two radios — one on the school police band and one linked to city police communications.

He said he had not had to use his weapons inside the school building.

Prosser and West work with School District police officers to patrol around the school at arrival and dismissal. They watch for crowds where trouble may brew and shoo students from hangouts, such as the store across the street from Overbrook.

Once school starts, they go inside and spend most of their day on the first floor in or around their office unless they are called upon by school police to intervene.

City police weren't notified of the second assault case on Nov. 29 — a boy who slapped his girlfriend — until more than two hours after the incident, when the girl decided she wanted to make a complaint.

By that time, the boy had already been suspended and sent home by school administrators.

If charges are to be filed, School District police turn the students over to Prosser and West, an “exchange of custody,” they call it.

Through Nov. 29 of this school year, Prosser made 27 arrests including disorderly conducts and assaults, all noted on his desk calendar. (West, his partner, had been on leave from his school post this fall, but returned Dec. 2. )

When Prosser makes an arrest, he does the paperwork in his Overbrook office, then takes the student to headquarters for processing.

Young, the school principal, said she liked having the officers as “role models.”

“I’m the last wave,” said Prosser, an officer for nearly 16 years, formerly on the narcotics strike force. “If you have to come see me, there’s a serious issue.”

Students question whether city police officers are needed inside school, but aren’t opposed to them.

“It’s not really a problem unless you’re a problem,” said Wali Davis-Grant, 17, senior class president.

Senior Nashai Berry-Hill, 18, sees school officers frequently in the building, but rarely sees Prosser and West: “We don’t see the real police.”

But Prosser has forged relationships with students whom he has encountered, such as the 17-year-old who unfairly got caught in a hall sweep.

“He told me to chill, talked to me. I chilled,” said the teen, who now asks Prosser about police work.

Another student popped his head into Prosser’s office — Prosser almost always keeps the door open to make students feel welcome.

“I just came to say what’s up,” the teen said.

“OK,” Prosser said. “How are you feeling? You good? You apologize to everybody?”

The teen nodded. Prosser had arrested him for disorderly conduct.

Tyreese Ramsey, 18, a 2011 Overbrook graduate, greeted Prosser on the steps of Overbrook, his girlfriend and new baby in tow. He first met Prosser when he was having an altercation with a teacher and Prosser came to intervene.

“He ain’t like the other ones, all snapping and stuff,” Ramsey said. “He started talking. I thought I can be cool with this one.”

West and Prosser give out an award to the most improved student each year. Former recipient Shakeerah Plummer, 20, now a junior English education major at Lincoln University,

said she first met West when she got into an altercation, and he talked with her.

“From there on out, he checked on me. ‘Miss Plummer. I’m watching you,’ ” recalled Plummer, now an academic standout who runs a mentoring program.

It made a difference. Students took West and Prosser more seriously than school police, she said.

“Everyone plays their own part,” she said. “But at the end of the day, a police officer is a police officer.”

### **A close watch**

Senior Montez Wilmer said the school seemed calmer this year.

It wasn’t that way last spring when he suffered a broken eye socket during an altercation with a boy outside the lunchroom. Wilmer and his parents were upset that the school coded the incident a disorderly conduct rather than an assault. School officials at the time said Wilmer suffered his injuries because he slipped and fell during the scuffle; Wilmer and his family contended it was when the other student punched him.

Wilmer, 18, said he had put the incident behind him.

“I just wanted to get my stuff together for my senior year so I can graduate and go to college,” Wilmer said.

He comes to school on time and played for the football team.

But problems with other students loom. At a school safety team meeting of which Prosser is a part, Young said she had complaints from neighbors about loitering students. Prosser said he would ask for extra patrols in that area.

Concern was heightened the November day the teen was punched in the face. Rumors were swirling about an irate parent waiting in a red jeep outside the school to attack students at dismissal. City and school police blanketed the area, pushing students along home.

In his patrol car, Prosser followed two large groups five blocks from school. When they stopped, he put his lights on and parked.

“This is where the problem starts. So I’m going to sit right here,” he said.

He gave them five minutes to disperse, then walked toward them — which sent them scurrying.

“Thank you, sir!” said an older resident, wearing an Eagles cap. “It’s good to have somebody here to chase them.”