

Healing the Wounds of South Phila. High

Principal Otis Hackney strives to remake the schools spirit following the 2009 violence against Asian students.

PART
7 OF 7

ASSAULT ON LEARNING

Inquirer
INVESTIGATION



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

South Phila. High principal Otis Hackney takes a baseball cap from a student who wore it in school, a violation of the rules. Hackney is determined to raise the percentage of students who can read and perform math at grade level.

BY JEFF GAMMAGE | INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

In the early morning, Otis Hackney parks behind South Philadelphia High, unlocks the back door of the school, and strides down the corridor into the principal's office.

He doesn't bother to turn on the lights.

A wooden door opens to a private bathroom, among the smallest and quietest spaces in the loud and sprawling school. Hackney steps inside — and bows his head in prayer.

"Come what may," he prays.

He prays for the safety of his students and staff. That obstacles can be turned into opportunities. He asks for patience and good judgment, for wisdom and insight and the strength to lead.

Amen.

For Hackney, 38, these minutes of solitary prayer are the standard start to his day, as essential as breathing.

They give him confidence to confront the job ahead and confirm its central truth: To change and heal South Philadelphia High is going to take bedrock faith — and a whole lot more.

At Southern, as the school is called, the day-long, anti-Asian violence of Dec. 3, 2009, hovers like a ghost.

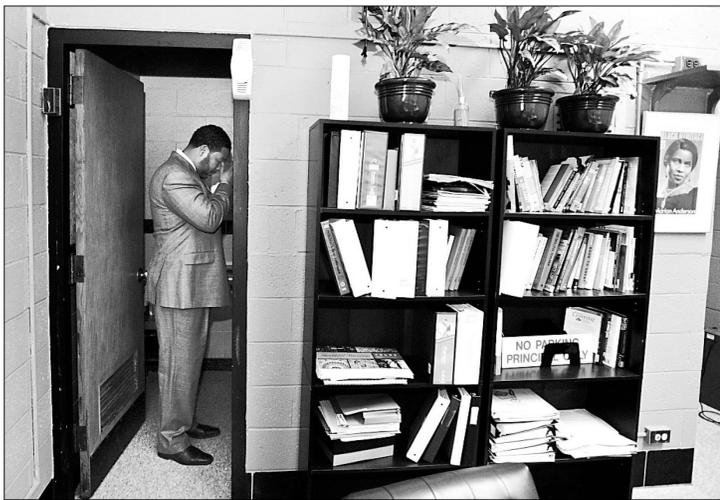
Groups of mostly African American students attacked 30 Asian classmates, sending seven to hospitals, sparking a contentious weeklong



PRINCIPAL HACKNEY'S BUSY BUSY DAYS

Above, he watches over students in the lunchroom, while at left he starts his days with a prayer. Below, he helps a student found sick in a hallway, and below that, scolds a student for wearing a baseball cap, a dress-code violation, while at bottom, he tells another to pull up his pants.

Staff photographs by **Ron Tarver**



boycott, and provoking international news coverage. A subsequent federal investigation found that the district was “deliberately indifferent” to violence and harassment against Asians, prompting a settlement that mandated broad remedies.

This year under Hackney the school has crept forward, becoming a calmer, more orderly place — but it was thrown into new upheaval in January, when Superintendent Arlene C. Ackerman announced that Southern would become a “Renaissance school.” The designation means teachers and staff can be forced out as part of a sweeping overhaul that includes longer days, Saturday classes, and summer sessions.

Hackney, the only person in the building guaranteed to keep his job, supports the Renaissance plan as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to remake Southern. But the announcement deflated the enthusiasm that had been building all year among the teachers.

“The morale went right in the toilet,” said math teacher Dean Coder, the teachers union representative at the school. “We finally had great leadership here, and most of the people were buying into it. To then turn around and blow that up . . .”

In the halls, day-to-day relations between Asian and black students remain fragile.

“Everyone knows their place,” said senior Rashon Brewster, who is African American. “Everyone’s here to get an education. We’re not really here to make friends.”

On Dec. 3, 2009, Hackney was the principal of Springfield High School in Montgomery County, a better school in a wealthier place, a school where last year the graduation rate was 100 percent. Now he’s expected to drive lasting improvement at an institution where failure has been the norm.

“Obviously, there’s a lot of visibility, a lot of scrutiny,” Mayor Nutter said in an interview. “He is well-qualified, has the ability, and, more importantly, has the passion.”



Hackney started the year with two major goals: Make the school safe for students — all students. And dramatically raise Southern's sorry academic performance.

He's determined to double the percentage of students who can read and perform math at grade level, from the low teens to 30 percent. And to do it this year — at a school where one-fourth of students are in special education, and almost every child is poor.

"Improving the academics is a state of emergency," Hackney said. "Too many people look at it like, 'Until you get these kids under control, I can't teach. ' Well, we can't wait for that. Because not every kid is going to fall in line."

Long troubled history

South Philadelphia High stands stark and squat at Broad Street and Snyder Avenue, an 818-student, international melting pot.

For eight straight years, according to federal measures, the school has failed to achieve adequate yearly progress in academics. For the last four years, Southern has been named "persistently dangerous." Although ethnic strife is rampant in the district, more assaults occurred at Southern during the last five years — 534 — than at any other school. By rate, the school ranks third.

At Southern, reform after reform has fizzled, along with the careers of its principals. Hackney is the fifth in six years.

So far this year, school officials say, no Asian student has been assaulted by classmates — a poignant sign of progress at Southern. It's difficult to know whether the change stems from new enlightenment or tighter security.

Asian students said in interviews that the school is safer and more stable, although some low-level torment persists.

"They say Asian people can't speak English. They say some bad things," said Son Nguyen, a freshman from Vietnam.

His first name is pronounced similar to Sahn, but because of the spelling he's taunted by others who say, "You're my son. C'mere, son."

Nguyen said the teasing had stopped lately. If it starts again, he's confident he can go directly to Hackney.

For Asians, the hope surrounding the principal is enormous. But they are not the only ones who want him to succeed. For American-born students, for parents, the need is desperate.

For Hackney, the challenge is daunting. And the odds against him are long.

A fun day gone wrong

The fun of Mismatched Day — an October event where staff and students dress in goofy clothes — has hardly begun when the morning goes ominously off-kilter.

"Clear the way!" a school police officer shouts as she runs up a central stairwell.

A fight has broken out in a classroom. A short time later, a boy is escorted in handcuffs to Room 106, the police office, soon joined by a second youth in similar wrist-wear.

Hackney stands amid a group of officers, administrators, and counselors, trying to sort out what happened. At 6-foot-3 and 250 pounds, he towers over the others. Beside him, assistant principal Cheryl Yancey-Hicks is wearing two

different shoes, though the levity of Mismatched Day has evaporated.

Early word is the fight sprang from a neighborhood dispute. There's no racial component. Both kids are black.

Still, Hackney needs to know: Could other youths have entered the building? Is there at this minute a group of kids roaming the halls, looking for a fight?

It doesn't seem that way. A check of security posts indicates all clear.

Just as the day seems to return to its axis, a parent calls: There's going to be trouble after school.

Fact or rumor? It doesn't matter. The possibility of dismissal-time violence sets off a new, intense round of planning and security checks. Now maybe it's not just one fight in school. Now maybe it's setting up to be a full-scale brawl.

An alert goes to all three Philadelphia police districts that make up the South Division. Talks with school-police supervisors dominate Hackney's afternoon, the tension rising as the clock ticks toward dismissal.

At 2:35 p.m., school police Sgt. Robert Samuels deploys his staff to the street. Hackney bounds up the stairs and into Room 207, the office of assistant principal Cecelia Merritt. The other top administrators are already there.

"We've got to be on this," Hackney says.

"Yeah," Yancey-Hicks answers, "but it's pulling us off task."

"I know!" Hackney replies. "I know."

Outside, two city police cars idle at Broad and Snyder. Nine city or school officers are on foot.

Hackney takes a post at the intersection. The radio in his hand crackles: Three kids just went running down a stairwell. Is it the start of a melee? Or merely kids running on the stairs?

Large crowds of students are moving out of the school, across the streets and sidewalks. The kids run and shout. The foot cops glance from group to group to group.

Slowly, the throngs start to thin. During 15 minutes that feels like an hour, it becomes apparent that this dismissal will be smooth and safe.

For Hackney, the focus on security has paid off. No child was threatened or harmed. But victory comes at a cost: Safety issues have dominated the day. Academics and programming have had to wait.

Constantly on the move

If it were possible for a principal to change Southern by dint of long hours, hard thought, and physical effort, it would have already happened.

Inside Southern, Hackney is an engine of movement and inquiry. He rarely stops to use the bathroom, and he doesn't bother with lunch.

He's an unlikely shepherd: In high school, he was booted out of prestigious Central High for bad grades. In college, he withdrew from Hampton University before administrators there could do the same. He had the brains. He just wasn't interested in listening to teachers.

Hackney went home to his parents' house in West Philadelphia, where he was raised, and where he had graduated from West Philadelphia High.



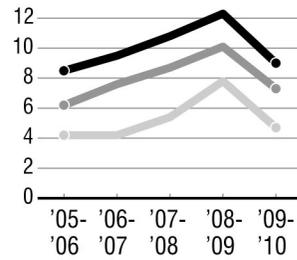
APRIL SAUL / Staff Photographer
South Phila. High student Wei Chen at a December 2009 news conference called in the aftermath of daylong anti-Asian violence. A tension still lingers at the school.

South Philadelphia High

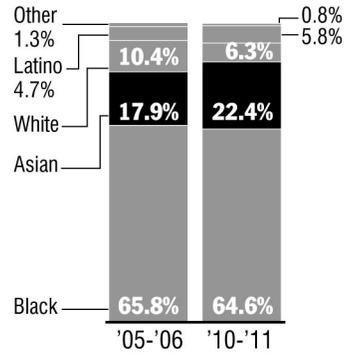
Violence peaked in 2009 when Asian students were targeted. The school has seen growth in Asians and Hispanics.

Rates of violence

- Violent incidents per 100 students
- Assault per 100 students
- Student assault per 100 students



Ethnic makeup



SOURCES: School District of Philadelphia; Pennsylvania Department of Education; Inquirer analysis

MIKE PLACENTRA and DYLAN PURCELL / Inquirer Staff



SHARON GEKOSKI-KIMMEL / Staff Photographer
At the Fels Center, students (from left) Muykim Chor, 18, Jasman Hill, 17, and Maria Ordinola, 18, practice in a school program.

He took a job in his father's business, installing heating systems, trading early mornings in classrooms for cold dawn on rooftops. Across the country at Stanford University, his girlfriend, La-Toya Pope, was on a trajectory to Harvard Law School. Hackney could foresee himself losing her.

He started classes at Community College of Philadelphia, then earned a bachelor's degree at Temple University. A master's followed at Lehigh University. Along the way, he found his life's passion — teaching math — in an after-school program.

He married La-Toya in 2001; she's an associate general counsel at Sunoco Inc.

Today, where others see Southern students of limited ability and potential, Hackney sees children who can grow and succeed.

"I know my kids," he said. "I was one myself."

Even with outsize energy, there are many things Hackney cannot do. He can't make parents care about their children's education, or free them from poverty or addiction. He can't fix damaged bodies and minds.

During the 2009-10 year at Southern, a violent incident occurred once every two days — and that was an improvement.

The number had fallen to 87 from 152 in



RON TARVER / Staff Photographer

Math teacher Juan Acevedo jokes with one of his students after class. In one class exercise, each of three student groups must form an English sentence from a math equation.

2008-09, propelled by a dramatic drop that followed the installation of \$700,000 worth of security cameras after Dec. 3.

Among the school's biggest obstacles, a district task force found, was the absence of clear direction from principal LaGreta Brown. Her resignation, after The Inquirer raised questions about her lack of state certification, led to Hackney's appointment.

"The bar was set pretty low for him, bluntly," said Helen Gym, a task-force member and board

member of Asian Americans United. Still, Hackney strives “to have a foundation of trust and goodwill toward solving what’s really a very profound problem.”

Asian leaders who last year couldn’t get their phone calls returned now have Hackney’s cell number. But healing takes time, and wounds inflicted on Dec. 3 run deep.

Changing student body

The talent that’s graduated from Southern could fill a red carpet: teen idol Frankie Avalon, TV’s Jack Klugman, contralto Marian Anderson, tenor Mario Lanza, pop singer Chubby Checker.

And not just entertainers — university presidents, jurists, scientists, and Army generals are former Rams.

But those successes sprang from eras when neighborhoods and families were more intact. Today’s students don’t know *The Odd Couple*, and nobody dances the Twist.

Who goes to school at Southern? The kids who are left. The kids who lack the grades to get into a magnet school or the money to enroll at a private institution. The kids who can’t speak English — one out of every five — because they arrived last year or last month from China or Nepal.

At the end of each marking period, Southern enrolls kids whose grades or conduct got them kicked out of other institutions, such as charter schools. Southern has no power to reject students coming from disciplinary settings.

Ethnically, the school is becoming more Asian and less African American, though the majority-minority dynamic is unchanged: 65 percent African American, 22 percent Asian, 6 percent Hispanic, and 6 percent white.

The broad breakdown hides complication: Kids classified as African American include immigrants from Senegal and the Ivory Coast. White kids come from Albania, Hispanics from Peru, Asians from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Bhutan. At least 15 languages are spoken at Southern.

The influx of immigrants has not stopped Southern from shrinking, students siphoned by greater school choice and the reopening of nearby Audenried High. Enrollment dropped 39 percent in five years, and this year it’s fallen 15 percent more, to 818.

On any given day, only about 700 show up. Only four in 10 will graduate within four years.

If Hackney is going to change that, he needs to get children to come to school. Which is why he wants to start a wellness program.

And a dragon boat team. And lacrosse. And fencing. And a squad for the Broad Street Run. And maybe a ping-pong team. Every day, fierce ping-pong battles are waged on the tables outside the lunchroom.

Those ambitions form a key part of Hackney’s plan: Fill the building with after-school programs, because sports and activities are proven to bind children to school — and through that to learning.

The Renaissance designation could help, providing up to \$1 million in extra money along with new courses and sports teams.

At Hackney’s previous school, Springfield High, the range of sports extended even to water polo.

There’s no water polo team at Southern. And no swim team, either. No field hockey, girls soccer, golf, or tennis.

Southern has no school newspaper. Until this year, students who wanted to learn a foreign language had one choice: Spanish. Southern has one music teacher, one art class, and a fledgling drama group.

So much has fallen away that it’s hard for students to imagine it ever existed. Or that it might exist again.

New classes in Mandarin — a language that could open doors to worldwide employment — have attracted about seven students.

At Southern, getting kids to take part can be more difficult than establishing the programs.

Swimming and learning

Senior Kevin Hudiono leaps off the side of the pool, hits the water — and goes down like a rock.

This first, hourlong fall lesson will be enough for him. Soon he stops showing up.

On the surface the kids are different. Together in a basement pool they’re alike: teenagers who can’t swim — the admission an embarrassment — but are eager to learn.

The new swimming course was teacher Coder’s idea. As a former lifeguard, he learned that African Americans drown at twice the rate of whites. The rates for other minorities are high, too. Many grow up with no access to pools, and never learn to swim.

Coder thought he could teach a life-saving skill and simultaneously promote understanding. He took the plan to Hackney, who immediately approved it. City Councilman James Kenney found money for fees. The Fels Center, run by the nonprofit Caring People Alliance, opened its pool.

All that work turned out to be the easy part.

Although 10 students signed up, on the first day only three appeared. A few more straggled in the next week. By the third session, a core group of three or four was making progress.

Maria Ordinola, a senior who immigrated from Peru a year ago, notices that Uyen Pham, a senior from Vietnam, struggles to float.

Ordinola tries to help. She puts her hands under Pham’s back — and Pham freaks, jerking upright and moving away. She does not want anyone holding her in the water.

Pham again leans back, and this time, it’s she who reaches for support. Pham grabs Ordinola’s hand and holds tight.

At the end, only a few kids have stuck it out. None will be Olympic swimmers. But none will drown if they fall off a boat. And all have learned more than aquatics.

“We help each other,” Ordinola said.

Senior Jasman Hill, who is African American, says she doesn’t want the class to end, she’s made such rich friendships. She moves through the water, stroke by stroke, and when she gets tired, she doesn’t sink. She floats.

Constant interruptions

Being principal of Southern is like working in a fire-alarm factory: Sudden alerts and interruptions are so common that they’re part of the job.

Every day, unforeseen events, crises, and

opportunities demand Hackney's immediate attention, even as he strives to focus — and pushes his staff to focus — on long-term change.

Over the course of a few fall days: A shaken teacher needs to talk to him after she was threatened by a student. A culinary class wants him to judge its cooking. A JROTC leader asks him to join a promotion ceremony.

During a November check of the second floor, Hackney comes upon the sort of distress that appears from the ether: A girl slumps on the hall floor, complaining of stomach pain. Nearby, ignoring her, a boy argues with a school police officer that he shouldn't be banned from class for berating a teacher.

"I didn't say nothing!" the kid insists.

Hackney takes him aside.

"Are you the person I saw in the office yesterday, who was very helpful?" the principal asks. "Or are you the person I'm encountering now?"

"Both," the kid answers.

"I'll take that," Hackney responds. The boy can be both, but he needs to control himself, and he needs to speak politely to teachers.

Hackney sends him to class, starts the girl toward the nurse, and proceeds with his check of the floor.

During the day, Hackney makes a point of being out in the building, roaming from basement cafeteria to fifth-floor math class.

He's not without institutional assets:

His leadership team, four assistant principals and a building officer, is huge for a school of Southern's size. Unlike the stereotype of the overcrowded urban school, Southern has 85 teachers for 818 students, an enviable 1-10 ratio.

In other respects, however, Hackney is starting from the ground up. The parade of principals has stripped away procedures and policies that orchestrate the daily operation of other schools.

Hackney has begun policies of his own:

The doors of student bathrooms are kept propped open — a screen blocks direct sight inside, but staff can hear if trouble starts.

Hackney also changed how Southern handles complaints of harassment and assault, which Asian students say were often not taken seriously. Now, students can write incident reports in their first language, crucial for those learning English.

Something else is different, too: There's no trash on the floor. Staffers still bend over to pick up the occasional wrapper, but last year the litter seemed ankle-deep.

'You need to decide'

Anton has "gone off" again.

This particular fracas, two days before winter break, started when he cut class, then tried to force his way into the lunchroom, cursing the staff and pushing past Samuels, the school police sergeant.

It is only through Samuels' discretion that Anton is sitting in Room 106, the police office, instead of at 24th and Wolf Streets, the city First Police District.

"You here again?" Hackney begins.

Anton says nothing at first. Then he says the cops are lying. If they plan to lock him up, do it — he's not afraid.

He's in ninth grade.

Hackney tries again: This behavior is dangerous — for you. It lets other people decide your fate. Push a cop on the street, and the police, prosecutors, and courts take control of your life.

"How much more patient do we have to be?" the principal asks.

"Do you really have to see the inside of a jail cell?" Samuels interjects.

"That's what you want," Anton shoots back.

"No. It's not," Hackney answers. "Are you in the back of a Philly police car right now?"

"No," Anton answers.

Teaching aide Vanessa Holman approaches. For months she has watched Anton, coached him, pleaded, and lectured. She knows his reality. She lives in the same neighborhood, hears the same gunshots and sirens at night. She knows Anton has a conscience. And that he's about to be lost to the streets.

"I don't think you can control it," Holman says to him. "I don't think you mean to be this mean."

Anton offers no explanation. And no promise of anything different in the future.

"You need to decide," Hackney tells the boy. "If you want to keep talking about getting locked up, that will happen for you, don't worry about it."

Anton asks: Is he going to be suspended?

Hackney practically laughs. No, he's not going to be suspended. Why would he give Anton a vacation? When it's over he'll be back in school, further behind and still causing trouble.

He'll go to in-school suspension. Starting now. And with that, the principal walks out.

The fact is, it would be easy for Hackney, or Holman, or Samuels, to provoke Anton into a response that would get him kicked out of Southern for good. A little prod, a verbal poke — he'll respond. And he'll be gone.

But nobody wants that. Hackney wants to solve the problem here. If he can change Anton's behavior, he'll help the boy — and all the students whose lives he disrupts.

Whether his words will make a difference, Hackney can't know.

In-class work

Math teacher Juan Acevedo, Mr. Ace to the kids at Southern, is barely older than some of his students.

The bell brings nine boys and girls lumbering into Room 425, where they slouch into seats for algebra class.

"Let's look at inequalities," Acevedo says. He offers an easy real-life example: You go to McDonald's to get a cheeseburger. It costs \$2.99. To buy the burger, you need an amount equal to or greater than \$2.99.

Acevedo paces the front of the room like it's a stage, moving from student to student and question to question, his voice firm and imposing. Distractions are minimal, participation mandatory.

What, he asks, are other everyday illustrations?

"Age," a boy offers. "How old are you?"

"I'm 24," Acevedo replies.

"I'm 19. It's less than."

"Great example," Acevedo responds. "I love it."

He widens the discussion: How old must you be to drive? How old are you now? Everyone calculates how soon he or she can get a driver's license.

"Now," Acevedo says, "let's bring it back to the classroom."

He breaks the class into three groups, red, green, and blue. Each has 10 minutes to construct an English sentence from a math equation.

The red team wins — and everybody applauds. With 10 minutes left in the class, Acevedo hands out a quiz on the day's lesson. Students complete their answers as the bell rings.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Acevedo says in triumph, "we're finished."

Renaissance concerns

On a cold night in February, district officials arrive at Southern to spread the good news about the Renaissance designation: More programs. More funding. Total commitment to helping lagging students catch up. "We're anticipating great, great things at South Philadelphia High School," Associate Superintendent Tomás Hanna tells 70 parents, students, and teachers.

But student Hao Truong, who last year was pelted with food, wants to know: Will school police still be stationed in the building?

Hanna demurs. Other modes of policing could be more appropriate.

"And how would the school react if there was violence?" Truong asks.

The offenders would face consequences, Hanna replies. Hopefully, by building relationships, officials could stop violence before it occurred.

Several Asian students turn toward one another. Consequences? Relationships? That's the safety plan?

Hackney sees what's happening. He steps to the microphone. He promises: Keeping students safe is the top priority. That won't change.

It's a promise he must renew each day.

A few weeks earlier, when teachers and students returned from winter break, it was as though the tension in the building had broken, the ghosts of Dec. 3 quieted. Ten disruptive students had been kicked out, which helped, but more than that had changed. People understood Hackney's expectations — and believed they were part of making a radical, positive change at Southern.

Now, the uncertainty over the Renaissance plan has everyone on edge, teachers learning whether they will keep their jobs at Southern even as they prepare students for high-stakes state testing.

It's as though the violence of Dec. 3 created a strain of post-traumatic stress. Students who were beaten bloody have been permanently sensitized to any potential threat. Administrators scrutinize every dispute between kids of different ethnicities, every cut or addition to programming, for racial overtones.

"It's always in the background," Hackney said.

But at the same time, he said, the school must move forward. It must educate students. It must create its future. Safety, definitely. Learning, always.

"The things we need to do are very, very difficult," Hackney said. "It's not miracle work. It's just hard work."