

District's violence worst in state

Wilkinsburg scores rank despite improvements

BY ADAM WAGNER

Wilkinsburg School District is the most violent in the state, says a study released Tuesday.

The district's rate of 47.23 violent incidents per 100 students, however, reflects a 33 percent decline in incidents in 2010-11 from the year before, according to the Commonwealth Foundation of Harrisburg, which

used the study to make its case for school choice in Pennsylvania.

Orissa Bey, a 1997 Wilkinsburg graduate who has custody of a niece who will be a senior at the high school this fall, said numbers don't tell the whole story.

"I can honestly say that they did a really good job this year ... because last year, there were so many fights ... and there were a lot of bullies in that school last year and this year,

they got rid of all of them," she said.

The high school reported 79 violent incidents - including assaults, sexual assaults, indecent exposure, terroristic threats and vandalism - per 100 students and the middle school 137 per 100 students, the study said.

Wilkinsburg school board member Shannon Bennett said the district's efforts to reduce violence, such as having clearly outlined penalties for wrongdoing, are working.

"I've been on the board since December and I've sat through a number of expulsion hearings, which is the appropriate reaction to violence," Bennett said.

The study concludes that schools where students struggle academically also are more dangerous. Schools ranking in the bottom 5 percent on state achievement tests - including Wilkinsburg's middle and high schools - averaged 4.6 incidents of violence for every 100 students in 2010-11. The statewide average was

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1.09 incidents.

The study from the foundation, a conservative think tank, relied on data reported by the schools to the state.

"There's a sense of hopelessness in these schools where there's a sense of continuing failure or a sense where there isn't much of a chance," said Priya Abraham, a senior policy analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation. "If there's a kid in these schools, it can create a harmful environment."

Nine Pittsburgh schools, including Murray PreK-8, King PreK-8 and Westinghouse 6-12, made the list of the most violent schools. The district ranked as the state's ninth-most violent, with 4.13 incidents per 100 students.

District officials could not be reached.

Woodland Hills School District was 13th on the list. Superintendent Walter Calinger said the study inflated numbers by showing each student caught in a fight as a separate incident.

"The data is slanted, partially due to the system," Calinger said.

Woodland Hills Junior High School suffered in particular, he said, where the study noted 43 assaults and 13.5 violent incidents per 100 students.

Calinger said the district took steps to curb violence in recent years, such as implementing a bullying prevention program.

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