

**Camden City Council
Ad Hoc Committee Report
on
Violence, Safety and Truancy in the
Camden Public Schools**

I. Introduction and Background

In 2003 and 2004 members of the Camden City Council received numerous complaints from distressed Camden parents regarding the state of the Camden public schools. These complaints ranged from fears about violence on and around school property, to truancy.

It soon became apparent that there was a vast chasm between that which parents and students claim to have reported and the information which school officials claimed to have received. In an effort to bridge this gap and reconcile these issues, City Council passed a resolution on April 28, 2004, creating an Ad Hoc Committee to investigate the matter. The Ad Hoc Committee was charged with:

- investigating the issues of school violence and truancy through a series of hearings;
- creating a forum for Camden parents and students to express their concerns about these issues;
- facilitating dialogue between the affected members of the community and school officials;
- proposing solutions, making recommendations.

Interested parties and stakeholders were invited to give testimony and included: parents, students, community members, law enforcement, judicial employees, school district employees and school board members. The Ad Hoc Committee was comprised of Camden City Council President Angel Fuentes and Council members Ali Sloan-El and Frank Moran. The hearings were meant as a forum for parents and students to express their concerns and relay their experiences. They were also intended to facilitate communications between the various groups and individuals involved in the education, and in the lives, of the youth of Camden. Summaries of the hearings, as well as the Ad Hoc Committee's findings and recommendations, are set forth in this report.

II. The Hearings

A. July 14, 2004 Hearing

1. Participants – Families, Parents, Students

Parents, grandparents, guardians and students responded to an open invitation issued by the Ad Hoc Committee.

2. Summary of testimony

Parents, guardians and students alleged frequent incidents of violence by both students and teachers, repeated denials of requests for transfers by school officials, and alleged inappropriate sexual behavior of at least one security guard towards a student.

Students relayed stories of being victimized in school and of having their complaints ignored by school officials. Parents contended that, even after a violent incident was reported, they were often fearful to allow their children to return to classes because they felt the situation continued to be dangerous. Parents also claimed that their requests to transfer their children to other schools were denied, or were unavailable, because either there was no space in other schools, or the schools to which the students requested transfers were also designated as “persistently dangerous.”¹ Camden currently has four schools identified as “persistently dangerous”.²

These families explained that, in addition to transfers, they sought other forms of protection and/or assistance from Camden Public School officials. They felt that school officials failed to satisfactorily address their concerns. Moreover, numerous Hispanic families noted an inability to adequately communicate with district employees, as many school employees do not speak Spanish.

3. Findings

Individually, these stories appear to be isolated incidences; however, in totality, they represent more serious problems in communication and in resolving discipline matters plaguing Camden schools. While fault may not lie entirely with the School Board and school officials, they have the most direct contact with these situations, and are therefore in the best position to address many of these problems. Because violence and truancy issues have not been sufficiently addressed, the schools have not been able to successfully serve the community and its children.

¹The Unsafe School Choice Option provision under the Federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, permits a student, who attends a “persistently dangerous” public school (as determined by state and local agencies), or who has been victimized at a public school, to transfer to a safe school within the district. “Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Public Schools”, New Jersey Department of Education website, http://www.nj.gov/njded/schools/vandv/0203/#_Toc74986178. Criteria for determining whether a school is “persistently dangerous” can also be found on New Jersey Department of Education website, at <http://www.state.nj.us/njded/grants/nclb/policy/unsafe.htm>

² NJDOE News, “Schools Identified as ‘Persistently Dangerous’ under the *No Child Left Behind Act*” http://www.state.nj.us/njded/news/2003/0731usco_a1.htm

B. July 19, 2004 Hearing

1. Participants – Former Board Members, Representatives of Civic Organizations

Representatives of civic, charitable and religious organizations presented testimony. Their testimony provided objectivity and a better appreciation for the information presented by the families at the previous meeting. Former Camden Board of Education members also testified. The Committee hoped that their testimony would shed light on the problems facing the children attending Camden Public Schools.

2. Summary of testimony

a. Former Board Members

Former School Board members offered a variety of solutions to the problems faced by the families of Camden students including:

- Beginning a community-wide, community-based dialogue;
- Appointing Board members based on their knowledge in the field of education;
- Hiring more bilingual staff members to serve the needs of Camden’s growing Hispanic population;
- Creating an “Office of Parental Complaints” that could aid parents seeking solutions and that would be independent of the bureaucracy;
- Implementing a school uniform policy;
- Adopting a long-term strategy to solve violence and truancy;
- A need for additional support for individuals who are violent in educational institutions, and who were returning to the school from incarceration.

b. Educators at Other Institutions

Recommendations included:

- Creating environments that facilitate dialogue and community input between the school district and the community;
- Developing more evening activities for students;
- Focusing on obtaining employment for the youth of Camden.

c. Clergy and Community Leaders

Testimony relayed both positive and negative experiences. Overall, individuals recognized a need for continued progress. One clergy member commented that the school his

children attend focuses on discipline and achievement. Most importantly, he pointed out, the small size of the school provided a sense of neighborhood ownership. He felt that the small size limited bureaucratic entanglements for parents, which helped them feel like the school was truly “theirs.”

Another community leader observed that many of the youth experience mental trauma from being exposed to violence on a daily basis. As a psychologist, she explained, such trauma is often the source of violent and anti-social behavior. Additionally, she noted that if students are worried about simply surviving while at school, they will likely have problems concentrating on learning.

Yet another individual described stories of youth who had been victimized in schools and who had not been adequately protected by the school district. She sensed an overall lack of respect for the students. She conceded, however, that responsibility for correcting the problem does not lie entirely with the school, but with the school and the community.

d. Parents, Grandparents, Guardians

One parent detailed her own experience as a child in the Camden schools. She expressed feelings of being treated disrespectfully and felt that miscommunication was widespread in the system. She believed that it was very difficult for parents to stay adequately informed about what was really going on in the schools.

3. Findings

Former Board members revealed how the school system might better serve families and students, especially regarding school violence. Community organization leaders presented psychological factors which may contribute to violent behavior. It became clear that solving the schools’ problems is not solely the responsibility of the schools, it is the responsibility of the schools, parents, students, and the entire community.

In addition to the above recommendations, suggestions were also made to:

- Reduce class size to facilitate learning, reduce violence, truancy, and increase sense of “neighborhood ownership”;
- Implement therapy in the schools for both victims and aggressors;
- Find an alternative to simply expelling “problem” students;
- Create a “youth advocacy board” to argue for the needs of students, giving them a voice within the school system;

- Find new and creative approaches to learning. Some of the anti-social behavior of the youth of Camden may stem from embarrassment of not having basic educational abilities and skills.

C. The Hearing on July 21, 2004

1. Participants – Charter Schools, Private Schools

Administrators of other educational institutions, such as those from charter schools and private schools, spoke about how their institutions deal with their problems and how public schools might solve theirs.

2. Summary of testimony

All attributed fewer problems with violence and truancy to smaller class sizes. Smaller classes allow teachers to develop relationships with students, thus reducing violent incidents. Since administrators get to know children personally, the administrators are better able to stop problems before they begin. Finally, administrators commented that parental involvement was critical to the success of its students.

One administrator detailed how she founded a charter school. She made clear that at her school, 9 1/2 hour days and Saturday attendance were required. This practice, she felt, facilitated better discipline. She made it a priority to know all of her students personally and would even go to a student's home in order to retrieve him or her if necessary, which cut down on truancy. She acknowledged that because the school was small, she could take these additional measures to assure attendance.

Another charter school founder indicated that safety was the key in operating his school; and that one way a safe environment was created was by involving parents. He, too, noted the importance of small class sizes in maintaining order, since students could be accounted for at all times.

3. Findings

The lack of violence and truancy at some schools was evidence that smaller class size, parental involvement and a dedicated staff could lead to successful student experiences. The Committee learned that while charter schools in Camden are available for students seeking transfers who have been victims of violence, the primary obstacle to admissions is that admissions are sometimes via a lottery system. Because of this limitation, it is extremely difficult for students to obtain admission to these schools.

The Committee also found out that it is equally difficult to be admitted to private schools in Camden, as they frequently suffer from a lack of funding. Although they have been more successful with fewer resources than public schools, funding is always an issue.

D. The Hearing on July 28, 2004

1. Participants – Current Camden Board of Education members, USDOE Representative, Newark BOE member, Members of HCREO

The purpose of this hearing was to allow the members of the Camden Board of Education the opportunity to participate. These individuals were placed in a difficult position – wanting to provide valuable information without undermining the Board of Education’s authority or autonomy. Also invited were: a regional representative from the Department of Education, a member of the Newark Board of education, and a spokesperson from HCREO, the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options. A representative of the New Jersey Department of Education was invited, but declined, even though the State plays a role in overseeing the Camden Public School District.

2. Summary of testimony

The testimony presented was generally informative. It offered insight into the perspective of Board members and other school-related officials. One speaker suggested that some of the violence may be attributable to external factors such as unsatisfactory home lives, the lack of employment, and no recreational activities. Another speaker explained the purpose of No Child Left Behind Act, and how that might play a role the Camden schools.³ Additionally, she referred to statistical data on violent incidents and weapons in schools. An official from Newark’s Board of Education noted that Camden’s truancy rate was proportionally much higher than Newark’s.

3. Findings

The Committee appreciated the difficult position in which members of the Camden Board of Education found themselves. Although the Committee found the information to be generally useful, it had hoped for a more productive session.

³ No Child Left Behind Act is an education reform plan signed into law on January 8, 2002. The reform is based on four basic principles: 1) stronger accountability for results; 2) expanded flexibility and local control; 3) expanded options for parents, and 4) an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/factsheet.html>

E. The Hearing on August 5, 2004

1. Participants- Municipal court judge, municipal prosecutor, police chief,

The testimony included that of a judge and of a municipal prosecutor. The Committee felt it was important to learn how truancy cases were handled in the municipal court system. The Police Chief of Camden was also invited to help the Ad Hoc Committee understand the role of the Camden Police Department in the Camden schools. A representative of the American Community Partnership discussed apprenticeship programs that his organization directs in Camden. Additionally, a psychological counselor in the Philadelphia schools spoke, and a representative from the Hispanic Directors' Association gave a statement describing her group's work.

2. Summary of Testimony

According to testimony, approximately 200 truancy citations are issued each week in the City of Camden. The Camden Board of Education has one employee who assists the court in drafting the complaints. Typically, a truancy complaint is not brought until a student has been absent from school for at least ten days. Parents, not students, are charged in the complaint. The Camden School Board employee makes recommendations to the judge who will then impose fines and/or mandatory attendance at parenting classes. Some felt, however, that parenting classes, alone were not sufficient.

The Police Chief explained the "Cops in Schools" program which is currently funded by a grant that ends in June 2005. He indicated that the middle schools and high schools had installed metal detectors and had controlled entries and exits; however, he suggested, some learning institutions did not require this level of security. He pointed to the Camden Center for Youth Development⁴, a youth services organization that also promotes education, public service and life skills, as a place that did not need police officers or metal detectors in its halls and recommended it as a possible model for success.

Other speakers observed that problems, such as truancy, often have multiple causes. They also sensed a huge gulf between parents and members of the Board of Education and suggested that "community collaboration" was vital to solving many of the problems in Camden's schools.

⁴ Formerly known as the Juvenile Resource Center.

3. Findings

The number of truancy complaints was larger than expected. The Committee was also concerned that funding for the “Cops in Schools” program would be ending in June 2005.

Recommendations by these individuals included:

- Mediation sessions between the parents and the school could be a useful tool to help ensure students’ safety;
- Juvenile court programs to solve truancy situation. They might also lead to a sense of responsibility among those charged with truancy;
- Create and fund more youth programs. Hold programs accountable for results;
- Find alternative funding to support the “Cops in Schools” program.

F. The Hearing on August 19, 2004

1. Participants – Chief Attendance Officer for Camden Public Schools, Former Assistant Chief of Security for Camden Public Schools

The Committee invited the Chief Attendance Officer to discuss his role in dealing with truancy cases in the municipal court. The former assistant head of security for the Camden Public Schools came to the Committee with concerns about the procedures regarding drug seizures and violent occurrences in the schools.

2. Summary of Testimony

The Chief Attendance Officer explained his job and the functions performed by his office. He explained the procedure for handling truancy matters. The Former Assistant Chief of Security for the Camden Public Schools, hoped that procedures would be better defined for handling drug seizures at schools.

3. Findings

The Committee agreed with the suggestion to impose stricter guidelines for handling drug seizures at schools.

G. The Hearing on November 12, 2004

1. Participants – Superintendent of Camden Public School District, President of the Camden Board of Education

The presence of the Superintendent and President of the Board of Education was essential to these hearings; however, in spite of numerous invitations to attend hearings voluntarily, neither of these individuals readily made themselves available to testify before the Committee. As a result, the Committee issued subpoenas to compel them to testify. The officials challenged the validity of the subpoenas in court, claiming that the Committee had no authority to compel their testimony and therefore were not obligated to appear before it.

The matter was heard by the Honorable Francis Orlando in September 2004. Judge Orlando permitted the subpoenas to stand but limited City Council's questioning to issues of school violence, police presence in schools, and truancy; matters deemed to be within the scope of City Council's statutory power to investigate. Issues such as the quality of education were reasoned to be beyond the scope of City Council's investigatory authority. Judge Orlando recognized the autonomy of the School Board; however, he noted that matters such as public safety and truancy are directly related to the City, and therefore come under City Council's jurisdiction.

2. Summary of Testimony

Participants questioned the motivations not only of Camden City Council in conducting this investigation, but also of the families who spoke out against the schools. The Committee posed a variety of questions to which limited responses were offered. Some of these questions related to the annual report on vandalism and violence, a report that the Superintendent is required, by law, to write.⁵ Unfortunately, the Superintendent was not prepared, at that time, to respond to these questions.

The Committee also discussed the possibility of more police officers in the schools. The Superintendent suggested that the police resources could be better used to enforce truancy statutes and an ordinance prohibiting school age children from entering corner stores during school hours.

In general, she contended that there were adequate procedures in place to deal with the problems in the schools, but did acknowledge a communication breakdown between parents and

⁵ N.J.S.A. 18:53 also known as the Public School Safety Law was passed in 1982, which requires the Commissioner of Education to submit reports on school violence and vandalism to the New Jersey Legislature. N.J.S.A. 18A: 17-46 requires the superintendent to present an annual report on violence to the board of education at a public hearing.

the schools. The Superintendent also inferred that parents must also assume some measure of responsibility for violence in schools.

One recent step taken by the schools was the creation of a Solution Center. According to testimony, the Center would work with parents through the district's Affirmative Action Department. It even has bilingual staff. As of the date of this hearing, data was not yet available on the effectiveness of the Solution Center, as the center was only a few months old. A spokesperson for the Solution Center did want to clarify, however, that the Center could not authorize transfers for students.

When questioned about the massive drop in violent incidents reported in the Board's own meeting brochure dated August 16, Ms. Knox would not stand by those numbers, yet could not offer an approximate number of violent incidents for the previous school year.⁶

School officials conceded that it was likely that a smaller educational environment would probably have less violence. Both praised smaller programs and noted that, in smaller programs, incidents involving violence and drugs were fewer than in larger settings. Finally, both participants indicated that they looked forward to collaborating with the City government.

3. Findings

The Committee was optimistic that the "Solution Center" was a step in the right direction. It remained skeptical, however, that the Center could achieve maximum results. The Committee was also encouraged by the success of the district's smaller pilot education programs. If implemented more widely, it could alleviate many of the problems being faced by the Camden Public Schools. The Committee also looked to further collaboration between the City government and the school district.

III. Conclusions

Over the course of the hearings, it became clear that trust was yet another obstacle that needed to be overcome. In developing its proposals, the Ad Hoc Committee has offered solutions that are intended not only to solve problems of violence and truancy, but also to build trust.

IV. Recommendations and Proposals

Individuals who testified offered many valuable solutions to the problems faced by the families of Camden students, which are summarized below as follows:

⁶ The Board's brochure stated that 234 violent incidents occurred in the 2003-2004 school year, as opposed to 1028 violent incidents in the 2002-2003 school year.

- Begin a community-wide, community-based dialogue;
- Appoint Board members based on their knowledge in the field of education;
- Hire more bilingual staff members to serve the needs of Camden’s growing Hispanic population;
- Implement a school uniform policy;
- Adopt a long-term strategy to solve violence and truancy;
- A recommendation that individuals who are violent in educational environments, and who are returning to school from incarceration, receive more support;
- Reduce class size to facilitate learning and increase the sense of “neighborhood ownership”. Smaller, local schools could help reduce the problems of violence and truancy;
- Implement therapy in the schools for both victims and bullies or aggressors;
- Find an alternative to simply expelling “problem” students;
- Create a “youth advocacy board” to argue for the needs of students, giving them a voice within the school system;
- Find new and creative approaches to learning. Some of the anti-social behavior of the youth of Camden may stem from embarrassment at lacking basic educational abilities and skills;
- Mediation sessions between the parents and the school could be a useful tool to help ensure students’ safety;
- Juvenile court programs to solve truancy situation. They might also lead to a sense of responsibility among those charged with truancy;
- Create and fund more youth programs. Hold programs accountable for results;

Many of the above recommendations have been incorporated into the Committee’s proposals. The hope is that these recommendations will serve to encourage the school district and the City to work together to solve the problems that have plagued our schools.

1. Develop a tracking system by which parents/students who file complaints receive a tracking number so that he/she can easily follow up and/or learn the status of a complaint.

Pros	Cons/Questions
-Will be able to track complaints more easily -Could eliminate problems where a complaint may have been filed but might not have been received by the school	-Is the tracking system corruptible? -Who would oversee the complaint intake process?

2. Report monthly the number of municipal citations for truancy, violence, and drugs within Camden Public Schools, including totals for each school, and disposition of each citation.

Pros	Cons/Questions
-Will be able to track cases more easily -May help generate solutions	-How would producing this report promote developing solutions?

3. Develop criteria to exempt certain parents/students from court appearances in truancy matters when it is determined that the student is not attending because he/she was a victim of violence or sexual assault.

Pros	Cons/Questions
- Protects privacy of victims -Could address truancy matters in a more protected environment	-Would this raise Constitutional issues if some students are treated differently?

4. Expand Solution Center to include a means to appeal requests, complaints, or grievances which are not reasonably resolved to the parents' satisfaction. An appeals board could include parents, City Council members, Camden School Board members, and community leaders.

Pros	Cons/Questions
-Offers additional opportunity for parents to seeks resolution	-Would this vest too much authority in one place? -Is Center independent of school bureaucracy?

5. Create School Advisory Board, an independent body comprised of students, parents, community leaders, teachers, to mediate problems, help develop and make recommendations on school policies

Pros	Cons/Questions
-Promotes sense of ownership among parents and community -Fosters trust and better working relationships	-Who would provide training for members? -Would this create a different layer of bureaucracy?

6. Create a public forum for parents and school officials to meet regularly and discuss problems and solutions.

Pros	Cons/Questions
-Facilitates communications between schools, parents and community -Fosters trust.	-Building trust may take longer than expected (“buy in”), based on history -Parents/students may still be fearful of discussing problems openly out of fear of retaliation

7. Encourage parents to work with Camden Public Schools to find alternative funding to continue the “Cops in School” program beyond June 2005.

Pros	Cons/Questions
-Provides additional police in most dangerous schools -Fosters positive relationship between parents and schools if working towards a common goal	-Superintendent has indicated that more police were not needed

8. Encourage New Jersey Legislature to establish a pilot educational choice program in Camden that includes state-funded enrollment in a variety of Camden schools.

Pros	Cons/Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Gives more freedom to choose where child will attend school -Eliminates the financial burden associated with sending child to tuition schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What criteria will be used? -Will this cause a flood of admissions to schools that may not be able to accommodate larger enrollment? -How does this address schools that admit on a lottery basis? -Would an increase in admissions produce a less desirable learning environment?

9. Expand existing alternatives to traditional middle and high schools.

Pros	Cons/Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides additional transfer choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Where will funding come from?

10. Create an interim emergency program/emergency crisis alternative placement center to place endangered students or students faced with immediate threats.

Pros	Cons/Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Allows students awaiting transfers to continue their education in safer environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Will require additional resources which may not be readily available

11. Appeal to local and surrounding business and civic leaders to establish a Camden Student Fund to support students seeking transfers to other schools for reasons of violence, sexual assault, or immediate threats to health and safety.

Pros	Cons/Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Creative solution for students who may wish to transfer but cannot due to financial reasons -Involves community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Funding is not always the issue, some admissions are via lottery -Businesses/civic associations may feel pressure to sponsor a student for reasons other than that of the fund's purpose

12. Create a mentoring program similar to the apprenticeship programs, mentioned above, to teach life skills, conflict resolution and violence avoidance skills to students.

Pros	Cons/Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Provides outlet for students -Offers positive adult role models -Teaches skills that may not normally be accessible to some students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Getting students to “buy in” to mentoring programs -Getting volunteers