

Council Seeks New Data On Policing in Schools

By MARK TOOR | Posted: Monday, April 6, 2015 5:45 pm

City Council Members and activists last week announced a bill to expand the School Safety Act to require reporting on the use of handcuffs or other restraints on students, complaints involving NYPD personnel and similar police activities in the schools.

The initial School Safety Act, which was signed into law in 2011, requires reporting on suspensions and disciplinary school transfers, summonses issued to students, arrests and non-criminal incidents. Supporters of the expansion said they needed more information in order to keep track of disciplinary activity involving the Police Department.

What's Being Sought

The new bill seeks information on which schools have metal detectors, the number of times ambulances are called to deal with disruptive students, repeated suspensions and temporary removal from class. It is a reaction to reports of what its supporters call disciplinary abuses or overreactions by NYPD officers and School Safety Agents.

“The disciplinary code lacks accountability, ethics and fairness,” Councilwoman Vanessa Gibson, who chairs the Public Safety Committee and co-sponsored the bill with Councilman Corey Johnson, said at a March 31 press conference on the City Hall steps.

She cited cases of 5-year-olds being handcuffed. WNBC-TV reported last year on one of them who was placed in Velcro handcuffs when he threw a tantrum at P.S. 107 in The Bronx. The station reported that use of restraints on 5-year-olds is not uncommon.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, mentioned the case of a 13-year-old girl who was handcuffed and taken to a police stationhouse for doodling on a desk at Junior High School 190 in Forest Hills, Queens.



SCHOOL SAFETY OUT OF CONTROL?

SCHOOL SAFETY OUT OF CONTROL? Jacqueline Yates describes how her son was given a summons for arguing with a School Safety Agent. ‘I wanted him to go to school to get a diploma, not a warrant,’ she said. She supports a new bill that would expand School Safety Act requirements for reporting police activity in the schools.

“Every time a child is handcuffed in school we need to know,” she said at the press conference. “...We know we’re only getting part of the information now. We need to get the whole picture.”

Avoiding a Warrant

“My 16-year-old son was having a disagreement with a school-safety officer, said Jacqueline Yates of The Bronx. “Another officer wrote him a summons.” No violence or threat of violence was involved, she said.

She had to work hard to persuade her son that he could not ignore the summons, which would result in an arrest warrant if he didn’t show up in court. They went to his court date three months later. “We were in front of the judge for 30 seconds” before it was dismissed, she said.

“I didn’t know police were in the school,” she said, adding, “I wanted him to go to school to get a diploma, not a warrant.”

Cites Cops’ Impact

“We’ve come to understand that the way children are treated in school depends on not just their Teachers, but School Safety Agents and the Police Department,” Ms. Lieberman said after the press conference. She said both SSAs and police officers need additional training in adolescent development.

“Officers are responsible for some of the worst abuses,” she said.

A spokesman for the Department of Education pointed to statistics released the day of the press conference that showed arrests, summonses and major crimes were steadily declining.

Arrests were down 16 percent through March 22 compared with a similar period in 2013-14, summonses were down 8 percent, major crimes were down 9 percent and all crimes were down 4.5 percent, according to DOE statistics. “This follows a 55-percent decline in arrests, 66-percent decline in summonses and 24-percent decline in crime from school year 2011-2012 to SY 2013-2014,” said a DOE announcement.

Suspensions, which are a focus of the current School Safety Act, were down 10 percent.

Union’s Objections

Gregory Floyd, president of Teamsters Local 237, which represents School Safety Agents, said he was skeptical about the bill.

“The public has a right to know what’s going on in the schools,” he said in an interview. “But they shouldn’t water down the statistics to make it seem safer. And they shouldn’t micromanage the School Safety Division from inside the City Council Chambers when nobody is working in the

schools.”

Mr. Floyd said he disagreed with DOE’s contention that crime is down in the schools, saying that it remains at previous levels but that SSAs are pressured to relax their enforcement, meaning that fewer incidents are reported.

Stress De-Escalating

The DOE said it was proposing to train more than 1,500 staff members on safely de-escalating “behavioral crises” and disruptive behavior. In addition, School Safety Agents are receiving a new three-day course in crisis intervention, and the training academy for SSAs has been extended by two weeks. The DOE is working with the NYPD in fine-tuning the training, the spokesman said.

The de-escalation plan includes new policies on when schools should call 911 and requires school staff, when possible, to use in-school and community resources, including guidance staff and mental-health professionals, to handle problems. It is scheduled to start in the 2015-16 school year.

“Through our new discipline code, I’m confident we will continue to hold members of our school community accountable while keeping more students in the classroom learning,” said Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña.

Police Commissioner William J. Bratton said the decreases in crime “not only demonstrate our dedication to the city’s youngest citizens, but they also illustrate students’ efforts to realize their full potential.” The NYPD did not respond to a request for comment on the proposed expansion of the School Safety Act.