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City Expanding Effort To Use Alternatives To Arrest in Schools

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While crime in schools hit an all-time low at the end of 2016, the city announced plans to expand school-justice programs designed to increase the use of solutions that keep students in class and minimize arrests and court interventions.

According to data from the Police Department, arrests, summonses and the use of restraints have reached the lowest level in history, continuing a five-year decrease in school crime, though union leaders and community activists say the numbers can be misleading.

The de Blasio administration plans to keep the numbers falling by expanding two initiatives that have been successfully used in other schools.

‘Keep Kids In Class’

This year, 71 schools will participate in the Warning Card program, which gives Police Officers and School Safety Agents the choice of giving students who are 16 or older a “warning card” for two low-level crimes that occur on school property—possession of small amounts of marijuana and disorderly conduct—instead of issuing a criminal summons.

The pilot was launched in the fall of 2015 at 37 schools in The Bronx. Those schools saw a 14-percent decline in summonses for those incidents at those campuses.

Eleven more campuses—three each in Queens, Manhattan and Brooklyn, and two on Staten Island—will join the program in the spring. According to the Department of Education, the program is “an alternative to court involvement, while still holding students accountable for their actions through school-based interventions, including disciplinary measures and guidance interventions,” and will include training sessions and ongoing support for both school and NYPD personnel.

The city also plans to expand the School Justice Project to every school in the system, offering “Know Your Rights” seminars and free legal assistance for students looking to clear low-level summonses from their records.

An Early-Warning System

DOE said nearly four in 10 summonses have historically resulted in warrants for “failure to appear,” and the SJP trainings are designed to not only reduce arrests but help school-age youth “increase their understanding of the legal system” and “address contact with the justice system immediately so it does not create collateral consequences in a young person’s life.”

Officials say the programs will help continue the decline in arrests and summonses in city schools.

“Our students belong in the classroom, learning with their peers,” said Mayor de Blasio. “Through our investments in school-based interventions, we are improving student behavior while keeping our teens out of trouble, and the effects are undeniable—crime is at an all-time low and graduation is at an all-time high.”

Police Commissioner James P. O’Neill said the NYPD was proud to see the reduction in summonses and arrests and was “working to ensure that this trend continues through the expansion of initiatives such as the Warning Card Program. The NYPD will continue to partner with the Department of Education to ensure the success of our students and provide a safe environment for them to excel and reach their full potential.”

A Positive Trend

The data for the first half of the school year showed that criminal incidents overall have declined by 7 percent compared to this time last year, which the city says is part of a larger trend—dropping 35 percent in the last five years.

Both arrests and summonses declined through the year, as did use of restraints including Velcro and traditional metal handcuffs.

According to the data, arrests for school-based incidents citywide dropped to 373 during the fourth quarter of 2016, compared to 436 in the first quarter and 430 in the second

quarter.

The number of summonses issued in the schools also dropped, from 339 in the first quarter to 254 in the fourth quarter.

Third-quarter data can't be directly compared to numbers for the rest of the year because it includes two months—July and August—when students are not in class.

'False Sense Of Security'

But Greg Floyd, President of Teamsters Local 237, which represents School Safety Agents, said in a statement that the numbers often don't tell the whole story.

"Crime statistics in public schools can be hidden. Weapons cannot," he said. Mr. Floyd is a vocal critic of the city's incident-reporting systems, saying school violence is often under-reported or miscategorized, which keeps students, families and the public "in the dark and given a false sense of security."

He said he had reservations about the expansion of the Warning Card Program, saying their use would keep crime numbers down, but "increasing the use of these Cards does not mean our schools are safer, only that there is inaccurate reporting of violent incidents."

Community groups also said the announcement doesn't paint the clearest picture.

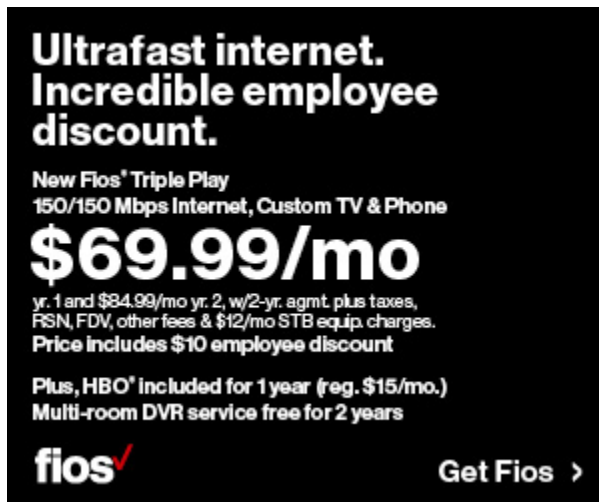
Claims Numbers Show Bias

Kesi Foster, coordinator of the Urban Youth Collaborative, said in a statement that while an overall decline in arrests “is an indication the administration is trying to go in the right direction,” the city must also address the fact that many of the students who are arrested or given a summons are students of color.

“Being pushed into the criminal justice system at a young age inflicts trauma, has long-lasting negative impacts, and often ends up with them being torn away from their families and communities,” Mr. Foster said, calling on the city to “keep young people in the classrooms and out of courtrooms.”

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