

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - September 28, 2006

Report underreports the underreporting of school violence

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In a series that ran from December 4-9, 2005, with follow-up articles, the Washington Examiner asked: "How safe are Montgomery County schools?" The paper claimed that: "School officials did not provide written updates to 50 percent of serious incident reports that called for a follow-up. School officials failed to file a required written report within the 24-hour time frame mandated by school policy in 14 sexual offense or sexual harassment cases, including several incidents of alleged group molestation. At least 10 percent of reports were not filed in a timely manner, as mandated by school policy." The research for this series began in May 2005. One article states: "Two months later, Montgomery County's investigative arm, the Office of Legislative Oversight [OLO], launched its own review of how serious incidents are handled at schools."

Last week, the OLO Report, titled "Review of Montgomery County Public Schools [MCPS] 'Serious Incident' Reporting," was released. This 77-page report is a great disappointment, because it neither comments on specific problems related to alleged underreporting nor does it deal with any of the many detailed allegations in the Examiner series. One must wade through page after page of federal, state and MCPS regulations and those of other counties to find any information about underreporting. For example: "Except for letters sent home by individual principals about specific incidents, MCPS' practices do not currently include the routine sharing of serious incident data with the community." OLO found that some MCPS staff felt that most serious incidents were reported, but others doubted this. "Some school-based staff cited examples of incidents that occurred in their schools that, according to these staff, should have been reported as serious incidents, but were not." However, OLO provides no examples of such underreporting, despite specific published examples detailed and documented by the Examiner ten months ago. For purposes of the subject of this report, it is as if this incriminating newspaper series was never written.

A January 2006 Sentinel article did include information that an MCPS official had: "requested in a letter to the OLO 'the need for MCPS and MCPD [Montgomery County Police Department] to improve the process to share critical information regarding serious incidents'." The paper also quoted from an April 2005 OLO report that, "The school system's 'Serious Incident' database currently is not designed to be a comprehensive source of information about crimes committed against students on a school site." There does not appear to be any references by OLO in its most recent report to its 2005 report related to school violence.

There are descriptions of a pilot project to improve serious incident reporting and other administrative ways to improve reporting. However, OLO does not confront the fundamental problem caused by the frequent breaking of the weakest link in any reporting system. To quote from the Sentinel article: " 'We are at the mercy of the principal at each school. We don't know about it [a crime] unless they tell us about it,' said Montgomery Police Officer Derek Baliles."

There are education activists who believe that it is the principal who determines if most schools will be effective in all ways, whether as an educational success or as a safe place. Strong principals make for strong, effective schools. This is even more necessary when a school has a number of students experiencing what is euphemistically known as an "educational load." such as needing free or reduced-price school meals.

MCPS is currently run by a strong superintendent who is as or more concerned with appearances as he is with dealing with problems. Principals are under great pressure to perform, particularly to raise school test scores and to get minority students to take AP classes and then get good scores on AP tests. This pressure extends to many other areas of school performance. While test scores cannot be fudged by individual principals (although they have been fudged by MCPS administrators in the past) there are opportunities to fudge on reporting school violence, which is or becomes one of parents' top concerns when the most serious of incidents occur and are extensively reported in the news media. Thus, any principal more concerned about reputation than dealing with less extreme school violence problems can always yield to the temptation to underreport.

Strong, effective schools are run by strong principals who have decision-making powers, rather than being treated as puppets on a string by central administrators who can't really know what is happening at a specific school. Unfortunately, this county may have no choice but to take away the serious incident reporting discretion from principals because of the documented abuses. The question then is: Should all incidents, no matter how seemingly trivial, be shared with the police, or should MCPS central administrators have their own discretion as to what is reported to the police? Should the police always have a say as to what the response will be, or should that decision be left up to MCPS officials for less violent incidents?

As long as principals have discretion in deciding what is a serious incident and what then gets reported, the facts about school violence can and will be minimized and concealed by those principals concerned about their school's image or their job security. If superintendents and their staff are instead given that discretion, there will also be a temptation for them to underreport. If a new reporting system is instituted, it must include full sharing of information between MCPS and county police. This also must happen at the individual school level. We should not read any more stories in the Examiner or other papers about school safety officers being transferred or fired because of their insistence in reporting what they consider to be serious incidents over the objections of principals.