



# **Annual Office of Safe Schools Advocate (OSSA) Report**

School Years 2021/22 and 2022/23

The Pennsylvania Public School Code of 1949 was amended in 2011 to provide for the Office of Safe Schools Advocate (OSSA) to fall under the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). It is housed in the School District of Philadelphia (District) and works to provide assistance to students who are victims of violence during the school day. This is done by supporting victims and their families in the navigation of District policies and procedures, including the following:

- Researching of incidents in order to provide appropriate assistance;
- Facilitating communication with school administrators;
- Facilitating communication with Assistant Superintendents' offices;
- Reporting of bullying;
- Requesting bullying investigation;
- Obtaining emergency student transfers;
- Referrals for appropriate services;
- Attendance and advocacy at disciplinary hearings;
- Attendance and advocacy at expulsion hearings;
- Support at Juvenile Court Hearings; and
- Attending school-based mediation.

The Office of Safe Schools Advocate is to prepare an annual report regarding the activities of the Office during the prior fiscal year and suggest recommendations for remedial legislation, regulations or school district administrative reforms. The following Table of Contents provides links to the areas of importance or report.

## Overview of School Years 2021-2023

The past two school years have seen many highlights and changes within both the District and OSSA, including the following:

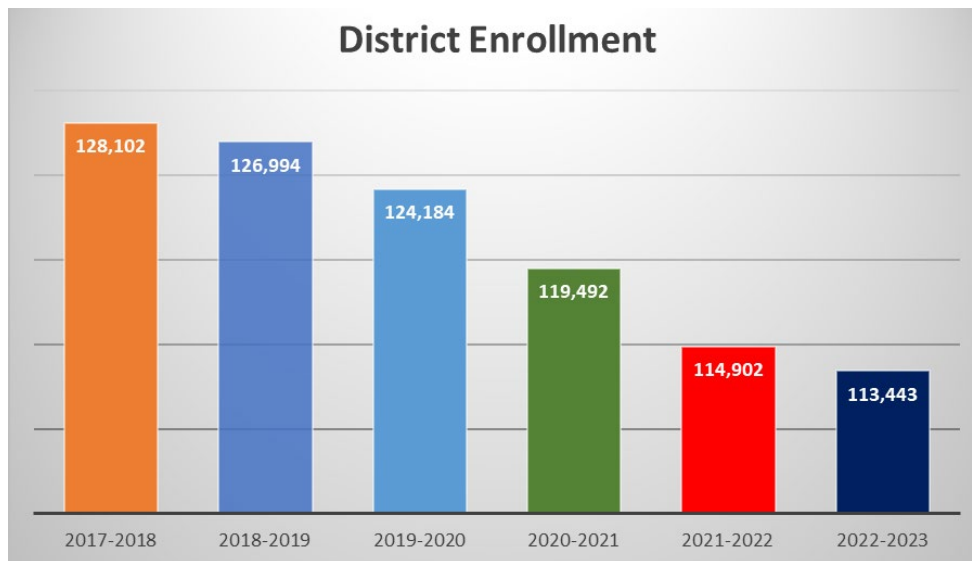
- Governor Tom Wolf appointed Carol Kuntz as the new advocate for the OSSA on April 9, 2022. Ms. Kuntz was working as interim advocate and former manager of School Safety prior to her appointment to the full-time role as advocate.
- Superintendent William Hite, Jr., Ed.D, left the District in June 2022 after nearly 10 years in office. Dr. Tony B. Watlington Sr. was appointed superintendent and was sworn in on June 16, 2022.
- During the 2022-23 school year, the District's Victims Assistance Specialist moved into the OSSA to work together to support students, families and school staff. The District's Office of School Safety provides for the Victim Assistance Specialist, Gina Crayton, to support children and families to ensure they have a consistent and comprehensive network of support and services when victimized by school-related crime. It is the first time that both the state and the District have jointly supported victim advocacy efforts.
- During the 2022-23 school year, PCCD established a new [Victims Compensation Assistance Program](#) (VCAP) staff person to work out of Philadelphia. VCAP helps victims and their families through the emotional and physical aftermath of a crime by easing the financial impact placed upon them by the crime.

- OSSA issued a Request for Proposal to solicit for a victim service program to provide additional Victim Advocacy Assistance, specifically for the students and staff of the School District of Philadelphia. The proposal provides for a Philadelphia community-based organization/agency to assist in victim's advocacy through the OSSA.
- OSSA continued to work closely with Philadelphia Police Department's Community Resource and Victims Advocacy Officers to provide referrals for students and families. Police contact the OSSA when students are victimized and in need of assistance. Staff members contact parents/caregivers to determine and mitigate needs.

### Student Population Overview

The 2021-2022 school year brought students back to school on a full-time basis following the tumultuous COVID-pandemic period. In March of 2022, the District's Office of Research and Evaluation completed an analysis of enrollment trends which portrayed a decrease in the overall student enrollment in district schools and an increase in cyber charter schools. There were 5,424 students enrolled in cyber charter school in the 2017-2018 school year, which steadily increased to 13,405 students in 2022-2023. Brick and mortar charter schools had a 5% increase in enrollment between 2017 and 2021, but in the 2021-2022 school year there was a 2% decrease in enrollment. The 2022-2023 school year saw a similar trend with enrollment continuing to drop.

A brief overview of the changes in District enrollment is listed in the chart below. Please click on the following link to view the full enrollment report (see [School District of Philadelphia Enrollment](#)).



### Student Attendance

Student enrollment was not the only statistic to decrease over the course of the 5-year period. Just as student attendance has experienced a downward trend, habitual truancy has also been creeping up. According to PDE's Basic Educational Circular, [Compulsory School Attendance, Unlawful Absences, and School Attendance Improvement Conferences](#), "a child is 'truant' if the child is subject to compulsory school laws and has incurred three or more school days of unexcused absences during the current school

year. A child is 'habitually truant' if the child is subject to compulsory school laws and has incurred six or more school days of unexcused absences during the current school year."

In the 2021-2022 school year, the District reported a rate of 57.36% habitual truancy in their School Safety Report to the PA Department of Education.

Speaking specifically of student attendance as it relates to victims of violence within the District, the OSSA worked with approximately 250 students who were victims of violence over the 2021-22 school year. Most of the students returned to school without any extenuating issues; however, several parents/caregivers did not feel comfortable returning their children to schools due to safety concerns. They made a conscientious decision to have their child risk being truant rather than return them to the same school. Many waited for transfers to another school, or avoided 'brick and mortar' schools altogether and sent their children to cyber school. Some decided to homeschool their children or just keep them at home, not concerned with their return to school. The OSSA worked with the Family and Community Engagement Office (FACE), the Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities, the individual schools' administrators and counselors, and the Office of Student Enrollment and Placement in liaising with the parents/caregivers to provide education for their children.

## Incident Reporting

The District provides the OSSA with serious incident reports on a daily basis. These reports comprise information regarding the incidents of violence that occur during the school day. They include information about student victims, offenders, staff members and the schools of origin. The following are the types of incidents reported under Section 1310-A of the PA Public School Code:

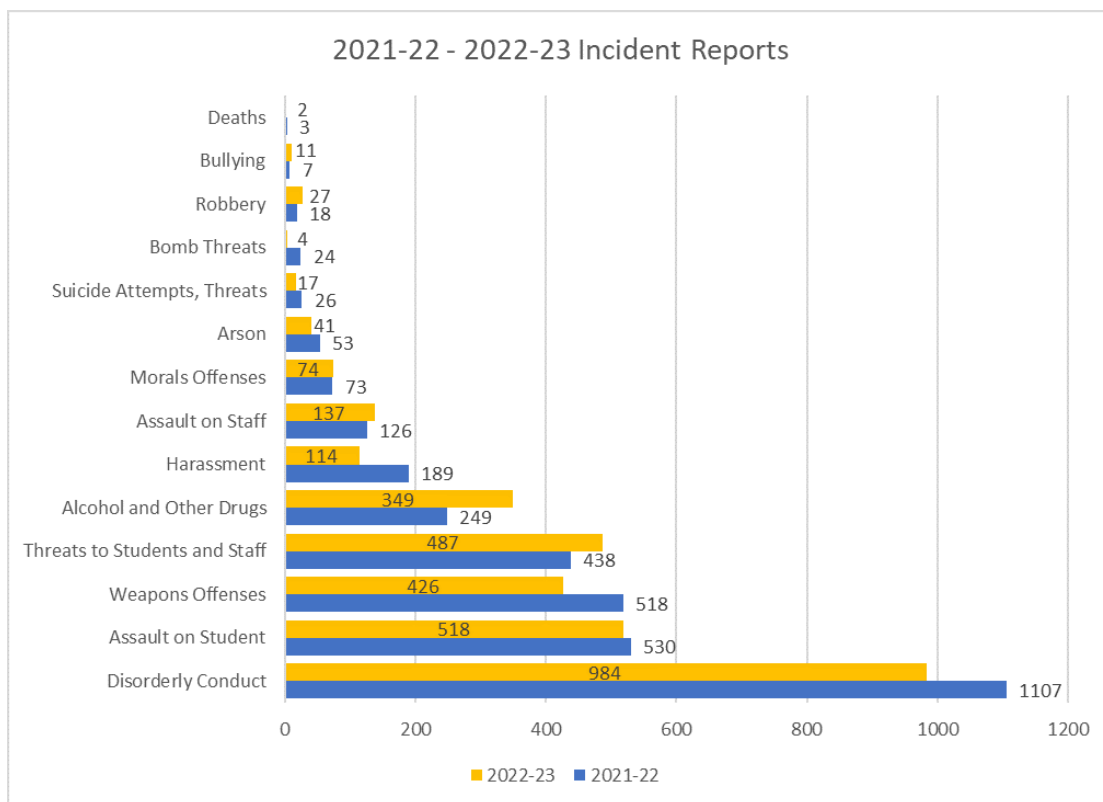
Relating to acts of violence	Relating to aggravated indecent assault
Criminal homicide	Relating to indecent assault
Relating to simple assault	Relating to arson and related offenses
Relating to aggravated assault	Relating to robbery
Relating to rape	Relating to robbery of motor vehicle
Relating to statutory sexual assault	Relating to possession of a weapon
Relating to involuntary deviate sexual intercourse	Relating to possession, use or sale of controlled substances on school property
Relating to sexual assault	Relating to possession, use or sale of alcohol or tobacco by any person on school property

Each school entity in Pennsylvania is required to submit an annual incident report to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). The District uses their Student Information System (SIS) through the Office of Information Technology and Data Management to gather this information and submit it to PDE.

OSSA would note that the District utilizes incident codes that use different definitions than those utilized by OSSA and PDE, which rely on the definitions of those crimes as included in the [Title 18 Crimes and Offenses](#) of the PA Consolidated Statutes. Many of the District's codes are also combined (e.g., the District's code "Assault on Student" includes both aggravated and simple assaults, which are separate offenses under the PDE reporting system). Disorderly conduct includes several offenses, including intending to cause public (including school) inconvenience or alarm; engaging in fighting, threatening, violent or tumultuous behavior, or making unreasonable noise, or using obscene language or gesture; or creating a hazardous or physically offensive condition by an act which serves no legitimate purpose. The District also categorizes Title 18 offenses related to a sexual incident under a "Morals Offense" category. OSSA would note that this deviations in coding language can result in challenges in determining the actual number and type of incidents occurring in the District.

### Number of Incidents Reported to OSSA

Over the course of the 2021-22 school year, there were 3361 reports submitted to the OSSA associated with Section 1310-A of the PA Public School Code. A total of 3191 reports were made in the 2022-23 school year. The following are aggregate District incident counts of those categories.



The map below provides a more in-depth view of the number of incidents occurring within the individual schools in the 2021-23 school years. It also provides a glimpse of the number of police dispatches

for crimes made in the catchment areas of each of the schools. More information regarding crime incidents in Philadelphia can be found at [Crime Incidents - OpenDataPhilly](#).

### **Incident Number Distinctions**

As noted in previous Annual Reports, there is often a wide discrepancy between the number of incidents reported to the District, to PDE, and ultimately, to OSSA. This may be due in part to how incidents are coded within the District's system; the language of Section 1310-A as written and how the District interprets which information it is allowed to share by law; administrative inconsistencies or data entry errors; or any number of other of possible reasons.

For example, of the data reported by the District to PDE directly, there were 347 incidents that occurred off grounds while en route to or from school in 2021-2022. Due to the language of Section 1310-A, the District does not provide direct information to OSSA on the number of incidents that occur when students are transported to or from school through busses or public transportation. While OSSA has assisted victims in these cases, it is only when those victimized reached out directly to OSSA for assistance. Thus, the number of incidents reported to OSSA in the data set above do not reflect any incidents occurring when students are travelling to and from school.

Bullying counts are also not fully reflected in the data reports to the OSSA. For example, in the 2021-2022 school year, seven bullying incidents were reported to OSSA, while 149 were reported to PDE. On the District website, under the [Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities](#), there were a total of 268 substantiated reports of bullying, and 270 reports of harassment. These examples illustrate the differences between the total known incidents throughout the school year.

PDE receives a broader count of incidents to include academic and student codes of conduct, as well as truancy, adjudication reports, etc. To view the detailed report the District submitted to PDE for reference, click here, [School District of Philadelphia Safe Schools Report.pdf](#).

### **School Climate**

In Philadelphia, all schools are continuously dealing with the strife that is occurring within the homes and neighborhoods of their student population. Gun violence is almost a weekly occurrence. Fights, including student assaults by other students or family/community members waiting outside school perimeters to gang up on individual students, are not uncommon. To read more about the incidents that occurred click [Incident-Reporting.aspx](#)

Many of the calls that come into the OSSA are from parents/caregivers who want assistance in obtaining a safety plan for their child at the school. Some are also seeking assistance in helping their child to be transferred from the school so that they will be safe. This is particularly challenging in that there are neighborhoods and schools that are persistently unsafe.

There is a national, state and local movement to take a look at what is occurring and how students, school staff, and parents/caregivers feel about their school and community, and to determine and implement initiatives that help to promote a positive school climate.

School Climate is defined as "the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures."

Why is school climate important?

"A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life. This climate includes:

- Norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.
- People are engaged and respected.
- Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning.
- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment." (See [National School Climate Council Opens In A New Window](#))

### **School District of Philadelphia – "Goals and Guardrails"**

In the 2020-2021 school year, the School District of Philadelphia Board of Education launched a 5-Year Plan entitled "Goals and Guardrails," with the "Goals" focus being on having every student perform at or above grade level while the "Guardrails" would be putting systems in place that will create environments that are safe, clean, provide educational opportunities in the arts and co-curricular opportunities in athletics, engage parents and caregivers in the school community, and develop a culture that is inclusive and equitable. In order to chart the path of progress, the District provides monthly updates and monitoring reports. Click on [Goals and Guardrails Opens In A New Window](#) to see the full listing of the goals and guardrails.

### **Measuring School Climate**

An overarching indicator of good school climate is the percentage of schools within the District with both a high Overall District-Wide Survey Climate rating and a high Overall District-Wide Survey Instructional Environment rating. The indicator is that it will grow from 17.7% (38 schools) in August 2020 to 58.6% (126 schools) by August 2026.

In the 2021-2022 school year, 6.9% of schools were rated with a high climate and instructional environment, falling below the target of 31.6% of schools. To find out more regarding the guardrails and their outcomes, click on the following link, [Goals-and-Guardrails \(philasd.org\) Opens In A New Window](#).

### **School Climate Surveys**

The Office of School Climate and Culture conducts two surveys to determine school climate. The [Student Well-being Survey](#) is conducted four times per year for students in grades 3-12. It provides information about how students feel about their experiences and relationships in school.

The [Philly School Experience Survey](#) is an online district-wide survey that is for students, families and staff. It can be used to assist teachers and administrators in developing an equitable and comfortable climate within their classrooms and schools. Click on the following link to view the survey questionnaires, [School Climate and Culture \(philasd.org\)](#).

## Student Responses

In the 2021-22 school year there was a 57.6% student response rate for District schools. Overall, the student body who completed the survey have a favorable viewpoint of their schools and teachers. The following table provides information on the students' perspectives. Please go to [School Information – District Performance Office \(philasd.org\)](https://philasd.org) to view the complete report under the Longitudinal data files, [SY 2021-2022](#). It provides a breakdown of the outcomes of the individual schools, the learning networks and the school type sectors (i.e., Charter Schools, District Schools and Alternative Schools).

Question	Percentage Responding "Occasionally"	Percentage Responding "Most or all of the time"
My teachers want me to succeed.	15.6%	75.3%
My school meets my learning needs.	35.1%	44.7%
My teachers treat me with respect.	24.8%	62.2%
My teachers explain information in a way I understand.	33.9%	47.2%
There is at least one adult at school I trust.	19.8%	54.1%
I am bullied at school.	8.5%	7.1%
I enjoy being in school.	31.7%	30.8%
The school building is in good condition.	31.2%	34.5%
My school is clean.	31.8%	26.0%

## Parent/Guardian Response

The District also surveyed parents and guardians of students, receiving a Household response rate of 15.1%. The following table provides information on the parents/guardians' perspectives. Please go to [School Information – District Performance Office \(philasd.org\)](https://philasd.org) to view the complete report under the Longitudinal data files, [SY 2021-2022](#).



Question	Percentage Responding "Agree"	Percentage Responding "Strongly Agree"
Parent activities are scheduled at times that I can attend.	57.8%	21.0%
I am treated with respect in my child's school.	46.9%	48.5%
I know how to contact my child's teacher(s).	40.0%	54.4%
I am satisfied with the response I get when I contact my child's school with questions or concerns.	49.9%	40.2%
I know how to help my child succeed in school.	48.1%	44.8%
How much do you agree with the following? The principal or school leader...		
is available to me	55.0%	33.4%
has a clear mission for the school	55.2%	35.4%
works to create a sense of community in the school	54.1%	36.5%
promotes parent/guardian involvement	53.8%	35.3%

Staff, school administration and teacher survey responses can be found at [School Information – District Performance Office \(philasd.org\)](https://philasd.org).

The District's students in grades 9-12 take part in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) through the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). In 2021, approximately 1,300 students reported on feelings, at-risk behaviors, and conditions in their neighborhood. For example:

Overall, 44.6% of students felt sad or hopeless (almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row so that they stopped doing some usual activities, during the 12 months before the survey). In comparison to Pennsylvania Youth Survey for students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, 40.1% of student reported feeling sad most days in the past 12 months.

One of the indicators of the guardrails is the percentage of schools with at least two FTE (full-time equivalent) positions, per 500 students, to support student mental and behavioral needs. The percent of schools with 2 FTE positions is 79.6%. This is on track with District indicator progress.

Outcomes from other reports on YRBS are provided below. For reference, similar questions have been compared to other Pennsylvania schools' percentages taken from the [Pennsylvania Youth Survey \(PAYS\)](#):

- 39% of students reporting saw someone get physically attacked, beaten, stabbed or shot in their neighborhood.
- 22.4% seriously considered attempting suicide; 18.6% PA
- 21.8% made a plan about how they would attempt suicide; 14.7 PA
- 13.7% attempted suicide; 10.9% PA
- 11.4% were electronically bullied; 14.6% PA
- 10.7% did not go to school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school.

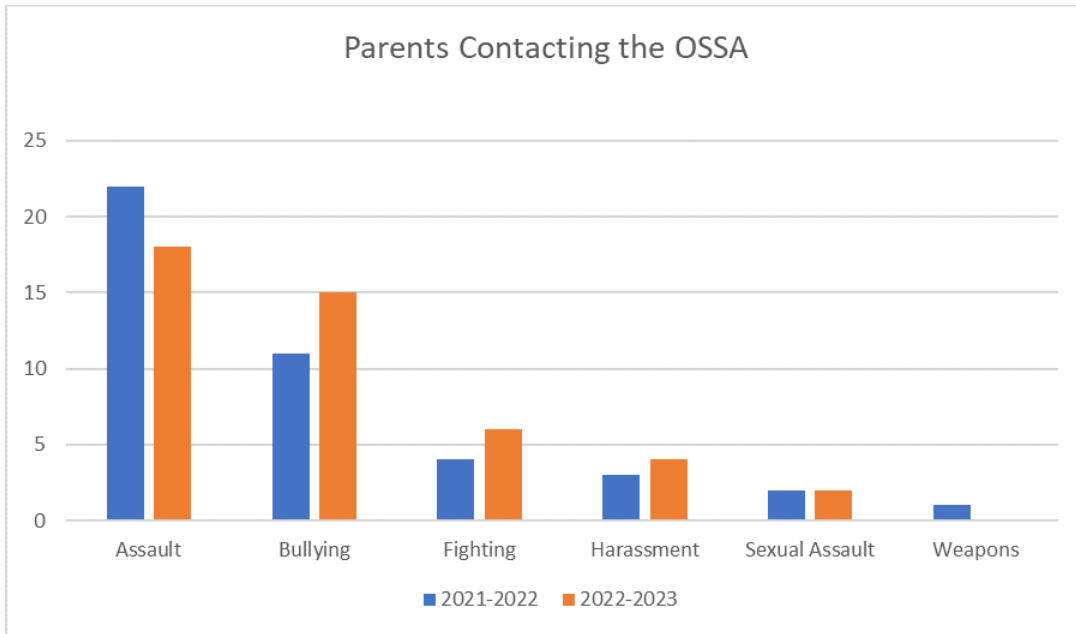
For more information on the District's YRBS outcomes go to: [Youth Online: High School YRBS - Philadelphia, PA 2021 Results | DASH | CDC](#).

### **Programs and Practices to Support School Climate**

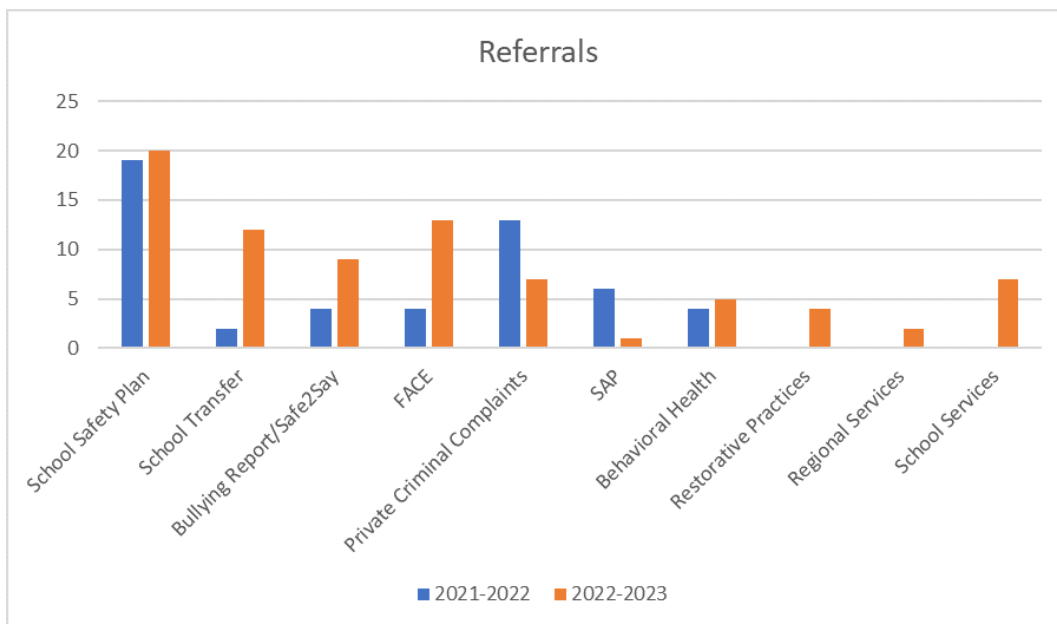
The District has developed a multi-faceted approach to better students, staff members and parents/caregivers experience while at school. The implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports has begun to spread throughout the school. Social-emotional learning programs, and providing schools with a school climate coach are just some of the initiatives that have helped to start the positive direction. For more information, go to [School Climate and Culture – The School District of Philadelphia \(philasd.org\)](#).

### **Victim Advocacy**

The OSSA is located on the first floor of the District Administration Building at 440 N. Broad Street. It is open from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm each week day. Parents/caregivers and students are welcome to drop-in at any time. In the 2021-2022 school year, 43 caregivers entered the OSSA, and in 2022-2023, 45 caregivers entered the OSSA either as walk-ins or called in for assistance. The complainants came into the office with the following issues.

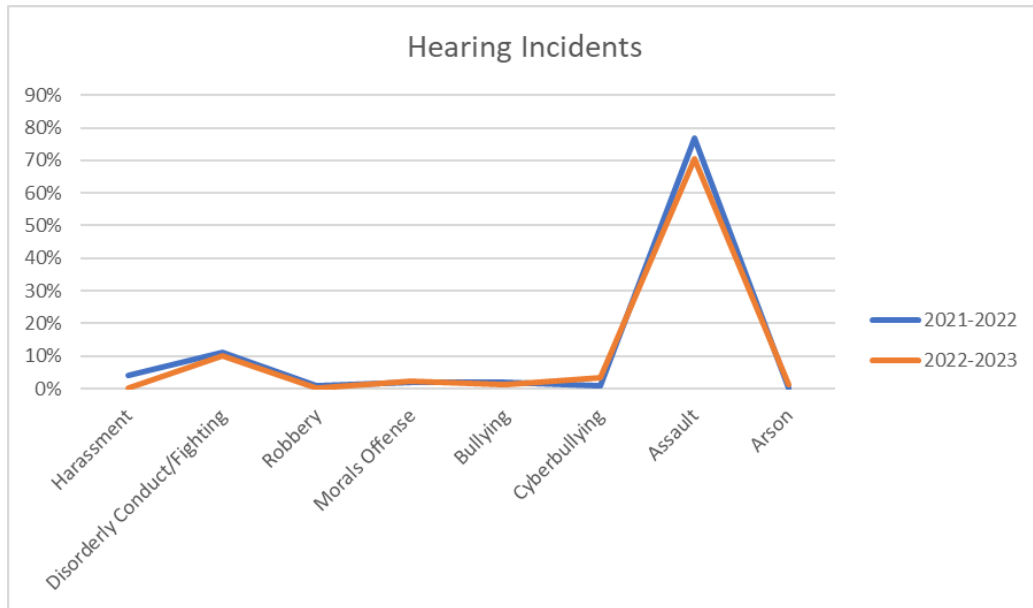


O SSA staff members assist students who are victims of violence. Assistance includes working with the student, their family, schools, police, district attorney's office, and community providers, to name a few, to provide them with the resources to move forward. The chart below depicts the referrals that were made for students and their families.



In 2022-2023 the O SSA contacted 368 parents/caregivers of students who were victims of violence. The O SSA receives a weekly incident report from the District. Working with the Victims Services Specialists through the District Attorney's Office, we were able to assist more families by connecting with them and making referrals when needed.

The District's Office of Student Discipline oversees the hearing process for student offenders and victims. The role of the OSSA is to contact the victims' parents/caregivers before the hearing to discuss the hearing process, assure that their child is receiving services when needed, work with the school and District on safety plans, and attend the hearing with the victim. In the 2021-2022 school year, OSSA staff attended 183 out of 202 (91%) victim hearings. In the 2022-2023 school year, the Victims Services Specialists attended 92 victim hearings. The following chart provides the percentages for the breakdown of the incidents associated with the school codes.



### Connections Within the Community

Joining Forces: The Philadelphia School District's Victim Assistance Specialist, Office of School Safety, joined forces with OSSA in 2022-23 to determine the best path to take for each student that comes through our door. This allows for a comprehensive approach in victim advocacy. The District's Victim Assistance Specialist (VAS) is a critical member of the School Safety team who supports children and families to ensure they have a consistent and comprehensive network of support and services when victimized by school-related crime.

[Victim Advocacy Assistance - Additional Supports for the School District of Philadelphia](#). Released in June of 2022, this solicitation was designed to support the OSSA in assisting students who are victims of violence and their families. The Philadelphia District Attorney's Office Victim-Witness Unit was selected as the recipient of this grant in the beginning of the 2022-23 school year. They are responsible for providing a direct connection to victim service provider services and other agencies/organizations within the community.

## OSSA Policy and Legislative Recommendations

### 1) Clarify the Definition of Victim to Eliminate Varying Incident Reports:

Incident reporting is a key component of the work of OSSA. Incident reports and accompanying information are received from two separate offices within the District, which at times have a different determination of the act of violence and whether a student is deemed to be a victim. OSSA would recommend adding a definition of 'victim' within the School Code to provide clarity as to which individuals are clearly 'victims' and thus are eligible for assistance from OSSA.

### 2) Reduce Delays in Data Reporting:

Incidents are reported to the OSSA on a daily basis; however, incidents are not reported on a 'real-time' basis. That is, incidents are generally two weeks to months old before they are officially reported to OSSA. Many times, schools do not report the incident on time to the incident control unit. This hinders the ability to provide timely assistance to victims. OSSA would recommend that the District improve training and/or policies and procedures on incident reporting so that victims can receive immediate assistance.

### 3) Eliminate Differences in Reporting:

Annually, OSSA conducts a study to compare the information that is submitted to PDE and that to the OSSA. For the 2021-22 school year, 9,765 incidents were reported to PDE compared to the 4,223 reported to the OSSA. These discrepancies in data raise the question as to whether or not all victims that are eligible for assistance through OSSA are known to the Office.

### 4) Improve Information Access and Training:

Incoming information to the OSSA should be streamlined or provided to an approved OSSA staff member with access to certain school files so that there are no discrepancies in incident reporting. All staff members of the District should receive training on how to properly code and provide incident reports and how to properly identify students who are victims. Again, OSSA recommends defining what a victim is in the Public School Code so that everyone is knowledgeable of how to code them in their reporting.

### 5) Provide Educational Alternatives for Disruptive Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs):

Some classrooms and schools face challenges with certain students who have IEPs that have engaged in threatening, aggressive, or abusive behavior. As that behavior may be the result of the student's identified disability, it can be difficult for the school to take appropriate measures to handle the situation while ensuring an uninterrupted learning environment for other students. To address this issue effectively, it could prove beneficial to explore an educational alternative where such students receive specialized education outside of their regular classroom setting. This approach aims to cater to their unique needs while maintaining a conducive learning atmosphere for all students.