

**South Philadelphia High School Asian Student Advocates  
(Asian Americans United, Boat People SOS, Victim/Witness Services of South Philadelphia, Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund)  
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**SASA Statement on Justice Dept. Consent Decree on South Philadelphia High School**

As advocates and organizers who have worked to address both anti-Asian/anti-immigrant bias as well as racial and ethnic harassment and violence in schools, we welcome the School Reform Commission's approval of ground-breaking agreements with the U.S. Dept. of Justice and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

In these agreements for the first time, the District recognizes and decries anti-Asian and anti-immigrant bias and violence and accepts a clear responsibility to immediately address all instances of racial and ethnic violence. What could have been a simple act of educational and moral leadership by the District a year ago, instead required over a year of bruising struggle and finally the intervention of federal and Commonwealth authorities.

This consent decree demonstrates that the violence at South Philadelphia High School was racial. It wasn't about gangs or retaliation, violent homes or adolescent differences. The focus of our complaint was not about problematic young people but about a School District that had failed to do everything in its power to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for learning. As appalling as the December attacks on Asian immigrant youth were, it was the egregious conduct of school and district officials in the months leading up to that day and the months since that warranted federal intervention. We celebrate the lasting gains of these agreements; we hope that they are also welcomed with a measure of abiding humility and deep sorrow for the lack of action which required it.

We fought hard and unrelentingly to establish these agreements through these particular agencies because we know that indifference to racial and ethnic violence, and to anti-Asian, anti-immigrant violence in particular, is pernicious and widespread in too many parts of this district. We know also that racial and ethnic violence is a particular form of violence that demands specific responses. Racial and ethnic violence silences and intimidates entire communities. Racial slurs, threats, and harassment send a message to entire communities that they are not welcome and that they are not safe.

We know that the challenges here are difficult, but we cannot continue to act as if all kids ought to just get along. While racial and ethnic violence is always reprehensible, it is important to remember that its continuation is made possible by institutional response. If we understand that racism and bias is a learned behavior then we also understand that schools have both a responsibility and a moral charge to actively engage students in unlearning such behavior, to build multiracial, multicultural communities that can tackle what must be the toughest issue of our time: race. For decades our organizations have been part of such a mission and we continue to seek to work with you on that effort.

A year after a historic boycott brought attention to this issue, we look back on an incredible year of transformation on a scale often rare to see in situations such as this. We remain encouraged by new principal Otis Hackney, whose ability to calm and manage the school sends a clear message about the role of competent and compassionate school leaders and the detrimental impact of poor ones.

Above all, we are inspired by the courage and faith of Asian immigrant youth at South Philadelphia High School. Before these historic agreements, before a new principal arrived, before the public support and federal inquiry, their struggle and the sweeping change it has evoked started simply with the voices of students, some of whom had arrived in this country only a few weeks before violence descended. It is their voices that have transformed a school and city, inspired other students, and created a partnership that lives up to the best of this nation's ideals.