

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 21, 2015

Contact: Barb Grimaldi, Public Interest Law Center, 267-546-1304, bgrimaldi@pilcop.org
Amy Laura Cahn, Public Interest Law Center, 267-546-1306, acahn@pilcop.org

PA Dept. of Ed. declares Philly schools offer deficient curricula
School District of Philadelphia ordered to submit corrective action plans

***** Parents, Public Interest Law Center, Helen Gym to hold press conference on 12/21 at 11 a.m. at United Way Building, 1709 Ben Franklin Pkwy, 1st Floor, Philadelphia *****

Philadelphia, Pa. – In a significant victory for Philadelphia school parents, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has found curriculum deficiencies in four Philadelphia schools and ordered the District to create corrective action plans within 45 days. The Department’s action against the District comes in response to [complaints parents filed in 2013](#) and [a lawsuit they filed in 2014](#).

The curriculum deficiencies—at Bodine High School of International Affairs, the Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts, the Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush and the C.W. Henry School—were brought to PDE’s attention as part of 825 complaints filed two years ago by parents from 75 schools after massive state budget cuts forced the District to slash programming. The complaints of curriculum deficiencies at their children’s schools alerted the Department to problems such as lack of music, art, physical education, gifted and foreign language offerings, as well as to a range of other concerns like the lack of counselors and nurses. When state officials ignored the complaints, telling parents via form letter that the problems were “local matters,” some of the parents went to court to force the state to investigate and confirm the impact of the state’s cuts on their children’s education.

“When the state failed to respond, we could not just sit back and watch. Our children were facing dire situations at school, many of which persist today,” said Robin Roberts, a parent involved in the case. “My son was in gifted classes for years, until suddenly the district eliminated all gifted programming and left him and other students with inadequate academic classes. Meanwhile the state did not even know the district had eliminated required gifted curriculum from all schools.”

Seven parents and Parents United for Public Education filed the suit now called *Allen v. Rivera* with help from the Public Interest Law Center. Late last week, through discovery in the case, parents obtained a letter sent by PDE to the District that details the investigation PDE began in response to the suit. This is the first time PDE has ever investigated a complaint of curriculum deficiencies under a state regulation that requires PDE to oversee local school districts’ curricula.

“It is long past time for the Pennsylvania Department of Education to take an interest in the quality of education in Philadelphia. We are delighted the department has decided to take action,” said Amy Laura Cahn, staff attorney with the Public Interest Law Center. “These actions show the Department has finally acknowledged its legal responsibilities.”

The letter shows PDE first forwarded copies of the complaints to the school district in 2013, without requiring any response. In June 2015, the Commonwealth Court issued a ruling in *Allen v. Rivera* that affirmed PDE’s responsibility to investigate the complaints. Then, after an almost two-year gap without any action by PDE or the District, PDE re-sent the complaints to the District and requested a response. The District did not respond to PDE’s multiple requests, except for sending an email about conditions of gifted programming at one school—a response that PDE deemed “inadequate.” As a result, PDE has now entered a finding that curriculum deficiencies exist at four schools. PDE has also directed the District to create and implement corrective action plans, which will benefit all students at the four schools, not just those whose parents filed complaints.

“Neither my son nor any student gets a second chance to go through school. While we are happy the Department is starting to deal with the unacceptable conditions in Philadelphia schools, we are disappointed that in the two years since we filed our complaints so many children have had to attend starved schools,” said Tim Allen, a plaintiff in the lawsuit and parent of a senior at Bodine High School for International Affairs. “In the future, we hope both District and state officials will take parental complaints seriously and launch prompt, meaningful investigations.”

“PDE’s letter has positive implications well beyond just these four schools. By filing complaints and taking legal action, we have blazed a trail for all Pennsylvania parents to get results when their child’s school isn’t offering the curriculum required by state law,” said Helen Gym, City Councilor-elect and outgoing head of Parents United for Public Education. “Parents across the Commonwealth should continue to file complaints, knowing that PDE has now acknowledged its responsibility to take action.”

The District is required to create corrective action plans for these four schools by mid-January. PDE will have to approve the plans and oversee their implementation.

Meanwhile, the lawsuit will continue, to ensure that PDE will fulfill the full range of its duties under the state’s regulation about curriculum deficiencies.

###

NB: Press should note this case is distinct from the Law Center’s statewide lawsuit regarding education funding.

About the Public Interest Law Center

The Public Interest Law Center uses high-impact legal strategies to improve the well-being and life prospects of vulnerable populations by ensuring they have access to fundamental resources including a high-quality public education, access to health care, employment, housing, safe and healthy neighborhoods and the right to vote. For more information visit www.pubintl.org or on Twitter @PubIntLawCtr.