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Handcuffing 10-Year-Old Girls

Racism, Philly Style

By DAVE LINDORFF

A four-letter word has been strangely missing from the coverage of the scandal involving the arrest and handcuffing of a 10-year-old fourth-grade elementary schoolgirl in Philadelphia who had been found to have a pair of sharp scissors in her schoolbag. That word is race. None of the articles in the city's news coverage of this story mentioned the fact that while little Porsche Brown, like 54 percent of her Philadelphia public school classmates, is African-American, the teacher, who rifled through her knapsack looking for some "good job" stickers missing from her desk and found and then reported the scissors, and the principal, who then authorized her arrest and incarceration by city police--before giving her mother a chance to intervene--are both white. (No stolen stickers were found in the girl's bag.)

For some reason it's important to tell the race of a crime suspect, but not the race of a teacher or a principal whose actions do injury to a child. At this point, both Philadelphia Police Chief Sylvester Johnson and Paul Vallas, CEO of the city's school system, have issued public and personal apologies to Brown's mother, Rose Jackson--though both offices are still trying to blame the other for the outrageous and uncalled for criminal treatment of a ten-year-old who said she had merely brought the scissors to continue work on a class magazine clipping project. A spokesman for the school district (which, bankrupt, was taken over by the state last year) claims that the decision to handcuff and arrest Brown, and to throw her unaccompanied into the back of a reportedly urine and blood-stained paddy wagon, was made by Philadelphia police called to the scene by the school's security guard at the behest of the principal. "All we had done was bring her to the principal's office," says the school spokesman, Fernando Gallard.

But a spokesman for Mayor John Street's office, speaking for the police, claimed police only took the girl to the station at the request of the principal, where they insist she was "already being detained." Police insist that the decision to handcuff the girl was a matter of police policy. Under Philadelphia Police policy, all suspects in detention from the age of 10 must be handcuffed, the spokesperson said.

Even there, there was an apparent effort to cover up the extent of mistreatment of this unfortunate and terrified little girl. Police initially claimed that the two female officers who responded to the principal's call, out of concern for the girl's well-being, only handcuffed her in front of her body, and transported her in their patrol car to the detective station. In fact, it has now been confirmed by the mayor's office, Brown was handcuffed behind her back, and was transported, unaccompanied, in the back of a wagon. (Last year, the local daily, the Philadelphia Inquirer, documented how many suspects arrested by police had been seriously injured--even paralyzed--during rides in police wagons, because of their not being secured to seats while cuffed in the van. It is not known whether Brown was belted in during her long ride.) To make matters worse, upon arriving at the detective's bureau, her attorney Pat McKinney, says the girl was initially placed in a jail cell along with two teenage boys, and later moved into another cell with two teenaged girls (who had been brought in for fighting and allegedly, in the process, breaking a teacher's arm). The ugly behavior by school authorities in this case has continued.

While the heads of the police and school system may have apologized, this didn't prevent the girl's school from suspending her for two days and holding an expulsion hearing, from which school police forcibly--and under threat of arrest--barred her attorney and her two grandmothers, allowing only her mother to accompany her. The Philadelphia School District is understandably anxious about weapons or potential weapons in schools, as there have been a number of serious violent incidents, but in this particular case, there was clearly no threat, and no evidence of intent either. The scissors were reportedly found at 9:30 in the morning. The teacher, new this year, then acted according to official policy and turned the scissors in to the principal's office. The item then sat in the principal's inbox all day, because both principal and assistant principal were busy with meetings. Not until 2:30, when school was closing, did the principal return and find the scissors in her box. Until that time, little Porsche was simply in class participating in the day's work, unaware that there was any problem.

When she headed for the bus, however, there was an announcement on the PA, telling her to report to Principal Ethel M. Cabry's office. There, she was restrained while police were called, and was subsequently handcuffed and taken away in the wagon. No one, reportedly, bothered to call her mother before or during her time in the principal's office, though her mother, an employee at Cigna's Center City offices, had provided her office and cellphone numbers as emergency contact numbers in the girl's school file.

Only when Porsche was in a jail cell was her mother called, at which point she had to rush off through rush-hour traffic to Northeast Philadelphia to try to rescue her child from incarceration. Porsche's attorney says at this point, her mother has not decided whether to take legal action against the school. "Her main concern is to help her little girl resume her normal life," she says. That won't be easy. "When all the news about the scissors broke out, all her friends thought she must have stabbed someone," says McKinney. McKinney says Porsche's mother, Rose Jackson, has thus far not suggested that racism had anything to do with her daughter's treatment at the hand of school and police authorities, but so far, the school district has not been able to come up with any examples from among the 259 confiscations of potentially dangerous items from K-4th graders this past year of white 10-year-olds having been turned over to police to be cuffed and jailed.

One has to admit, though, that it's hard to imagine a little white fourth-grade girl being tossed handcuffed into a city wagon. "Race may well have played a part in this, I'm sorry to say," says an African-American principal from a suburban elementary school just outside Philadelphia. "The fact that police were called in the first place, the fact that the principal allowed her to be handcuffed and placed into a paddy wagon, and the fact that her mother wasn't called right away, all suggest she was being treated like a criminal. I cannot imagine allowing one of my children to be placed in a paddy wagon like that!"