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EDUCATION

NEW YORK

Rikers slashings keep student inmates away from class



By JANON FISHER and BEN CHAPMAN
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Principal Tonya Threadgill (center) visits one of the young adult inmates classes inside East River Academy on Rikers Island. (Anthony DelMundo / New York Daily News)

An outbreak of prison-block slashings coupled with a staffing shortage has caused attendance to crater at a Rikers Island high school for young inmates, the Daily News has learned.

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Attendance rates at the East River Academy on Rikers Island have fallen by half since the start of the current school year in September, city statistics show.

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That's because a shortage of correction officers caused a spike in violence that forced jailed high school students to stay in their cells for lockdowns and left them unable obtain escorts to go to class, staffers said.

Instead of going to class young inmates are stewing in their cells, unable to obtain a public education mandated by state law and subject to more violence, staffers, who requested anonymity for fear of retribution, said.

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“Were suffering over here,” one staffer said. “Without the protection of the Department of Corrections officers, you can't do anything. It's never been this bad.”

State law requires the city provide at least three hours of instruction a day, five days a week while school is in session and the school offers students the chance to earn a standard high school diploma or an equivalency certificate, as well as several professional certifications.

The East River Academy on Rikers Island is a full-service public high school that offers a free public education to any inmate age 18-21 who wants to take classes.

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The East River Academy, on Rikers Island, New York. (Handout)

City Education department officials have said inmates who complete a course of study stand a better chance of getting a job or pursuing college after they're released.

But attendance rates at the school have fallen from 34% percent in September to 16% in January, official Education Department stats show.

School officials said that typical attendance rates for the school are historically close to twice the current rate.

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On many days only a trickle of students show up to the school.

According to an unofficial attendance tally provided to The News just seven of 69 students made it to class on Nov. 21. On Dec. 11, just 5 of 71 students made it to school.

Inmate learning has been an issue in city jails since 1996 when 11 students filed a class action suit against the DOE and DOC for not providing the education mandated by state and federal law. The case, which is still ongoing, has been through two federal monitors of the Rikers education system. After Oct. 1, when the city moved all inmates under 18 off the island after passage of the “Raise the Age” law, the city lawyers tried to end the litigation, claiming the issue and largely been resolved.

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Special monitor Dr. Peter Leone, who filed his last report in July 2018, found that the city was “inadequate and noncompliant” with a federal judge’s earlier order on inmate education.

Board of Correction member Bryanne Hamill, a former family court judge, has also been watching the issue closely. “When they lock down the jail, kids don't get to school,” she said.

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City records show an officials tally of 12 slashings between September and December.

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But an unofficial count kept by staffers shows there have been at least 19 slashings that have interrupted classes since September.

They said that desperate students have even staged fights in order to draw corrections officers to them, so they can ask for escorts to school.

“Sometimes the kids will create a fight on purpose to get the attention,” a staffer said. “They’ll send a bunch of officers to the housing unit and then the kids will be like, ‘can we go to school now?’”

A man enters the road to Rikers Island. (Spencer Platt / Getty Images)

Department of Correction officials said staffing levels have remained consistent at the Robert N. Davoren Complex, where young inmates are housed.

Correction officials maintain that enrollment is up for this school year, but acknowledge their system is far from perfect.

“We know we have more work to do, which is why we’re working around the clock to increase attendance, create a safer learning environment and deliver high quality education for these students,” said Deputy Commissioner of Public Information Peter Thorne.

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