

After Ferguson Decision, Big-City Districts Recommit To Focus on Minority Boys

By Denisa R. Superville on December 3, 2014 12:50 PM

The Council of the Great City Schools weighed in on the Ferguson, Mo., debate Wednesday, affirming its support for President Barack Obama's response to the grand jury decision not to indict a white police officer in the fatal shooting of an unarmed black teenager and reiterating the group's pledge this year to focus on improving educational opportunities for boys of color.

The council—which represents 67 of the nation's largest school districts, and whose student population is mostly comprised of students of color—is a partner with President Obama on his My Brother's Keeper Initiative. The effort aims to boost academic outcomes and other opportunities for minority boys, and 62 districts have since pledged to take up targeted programs—including focusing on reducing suspensions and expulsions, decreasing the enrollment of minority boys in special education programs, and increasing graduation and college-going rates—to accomplish those goals.

In a statement Wednesday, Michael Casserly, the council's executive director, said that his organization stands with the president and "his call for action, fairness, and understanding in the wake of the recent Ferguson grand jury ruling."

"On the surface, the tragic events in Ferguson concerned the police and the local community," Casserly said. "But ultimately, this is a case about how America's institutions, including our schools, respect the rights, well-being and futures of all our young people. This broader reading of Ferguson extends to how our schools define and mete out justice and ensure that all students have access to the highest standards and opportunities."

Last Monday, a grand jury in St. Louis County, Mo., declined to indict Darren Wilson, a police officer with the Ferguson Police Department, who on Aug. 9 fatally shot Michael Brown, an 18-year old African-American man who was unarmed at the time of the encounter. (Wilson has since resigned from the department.)

Responses to both the shooting and the grand jury decision have been widespread and not always peaceful. Acts of looting and arson erupted in Ferguson following the grand jury announcement last Monday. Many demonstrators, however, peacefully marched across the country—from New York City to Los Angeles—to draw attention to what some have decried as unfair and discriminatory police practices in minority communities. Many marched with banners that read: "Black Lives Matter."

President Obama has called for calm in the wake of the grand jury's decision. Mr. Obama has also convened a group of leaders—urban mayors, law enforcement officials, civil rights advocates and clergy—from across the country to discuss police practices and ways to engender trust and cooperation between the police and the communities they serve, particularly communities of color. He has created a task force to review local policing.

Mr. Obama also called for a stricter review of the transfer of military grade equipment to local departments and better training for departments that do receive the equipment. He also called for funds, about \$263 million, to outfit police officers with body cameras.

Michael Brown's family and others have been calling for regulations that would require all local police officers to wear body cameras given the widely divergent and conflicting accounts by witnesses of what actually transpired between Brown and Wilson during the Aug. 9 encounter.

Mr. Casserly said Wednesday that the Council of the Great City Schools will recommit itself to the pledges the districts made over the summer to improve outcomes for the minority students they serve. The districts pledged to "boost academic outcomes, reduce disproportionate suspensions and expulsions, and improve graduation rates for all our urban children."

In October, representatives from many of the districts convened in Milwaukee during the organizations' annual conference for special sessions on the pledges. They traded ideas on how they planned to implement the initiatives. Education Week took a look at some of the early plans, and will check in with the districts during the year as they roll out those programs.