

CHANGING SCHOOL

Hamilton High Seeks Security Behind Fences

In a conference room at Hamilton High, the principal and some mothers are talking over coffee about the school's upcoming candy sale.

"We're going to stress the safety and security of the child and the merchandise," the principal says.

An elaborate pickup and collection system has been worked out so that students will not be carrying money around for long periods. There will be no sales on the campus itself.

Out on the quad, the boys' vice principal is talking about an invita-

Fourth in a five-part series of articles on life in a Los Angeles high school by Times education writers Noel Greenwood and Jack McCurdy and Times staff writer Celeste Durant.

tion Hamilton has received to play a night basketball game at another city high school.

He is of a mind to turn it down because he does not think the other school can assure the safety of Hamilton students who might attend.

Earlier, the boys' vice principal had spotted an unlocked gate that should have been locked. He walked over and locked it.

"You can only survive by making sure your students within are secure," he says.

Later in the week, a hall aide is pursuing a boy who is leaving school early. The aide, a neighborhood woman, flags down one of the school's two security agents. The boy, she says, frequently leaves early. The boy is led off to the vice principal's office.

On another day, the boys' vice principal is talking about the two-man city police car that spends a part of each day cruising the area around the school.

"They keep the perimeter clear," he explains.

The phrase has a curiously military ring to it, and one hears it more than once.

The people in the halls are parents in our community. And although many students feel they are there to look at them, they are there to keep people off campus. We have only two security guards. Because they are here, the halls are quiet and the classroom doors are open. Students may feel we are overpoliced, but there isn't any such thing. We are not like, as the man called it, 'Fort Crenshaw.' You can work here and not be nuts.

—A teacher

It is difficult to talk about law and order at Hamilton High without seeming to exaggerate the situation.

For Hamilton does not fit the popular image of an inner-city school torn by turmoil and ridden by fears over what may happen next. In fact, at most times on most days, to the outsider, it is a peaceful, almost placid, campus.

Neither students nor teachers are in a state of alarm over violence, and if some few teachers do lock their classroom doors as a precaution against intruders, most leave them unlocked.

But the fact remains that concerns related to law and order intrude almost daily on campus life, that incidents do occur, and that the school has deemed it necessary to take a fairly stern line on security.

The most visible symbol of all this is the chain-link fence that surrounds the campus, interrupted only by gates that are opened during

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Hamilton High Uses Fences to Try to Lock Trouble Out, Security In

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times of heaviest student traffic, then locked.

At other times, foot traffic in and out of the school is purposely confined to only a few entrances, where adult aides watch who comes and goes.

The fence and locked gates bother a good many students, some of whom, risking punishment, climb over them.

"It's a jail," says one 10th-grader. "I feel like a monkey climbing all of those fences trying to get out."

But the fence and locked gates are seen as a virtual necessity by administrators and a good many teachers, who say the alternative is to lose control over who comes on campus.

"We have found," says one teacher, "that a lot of the difficulties come from outsiders, so you can say it's good to keep outsiders out. That's sad—in a way you are making a fortress of the school. But you have to keep some people off or the learning experience can't go on. It seems as if it is a necessary evil."

Permits Needed to Leave

Hamilton also is classed as a "closed campus," meaning students must have a special permit of some kind to leave during lunch or any other time before the day ends. Many students chafe under this requirement, though it is common to all Los Angeles city high schools.

Inside the school, students found in corridors when classes are in session may be questioned by an adult aide or a security agent or an administrator on a periodic tour of the school grounds.

To some teachers, the security system could stand more tightening.

"It's probably better than if there were none," says one, "but there are still too many wanderers who disturb classes."

But to most, the system seems to be doing an effective job.

"I think it's great," says one teacher. "Granted, it's a terrible thing to have to have—to have to inspect people. But given the school system that we have today, I think we have a good (security) system. I feel safer with them around."

Students are far more ambivalent on the subject.

While a good many want the

protection the system gives them, they are dubious on some points.

One 11th-grader, who says he approves of the system, adds:

"However, the security puts too much of an emphasis on catching students doing 'petty crimes'—climbing fences, playing cards. There should be more measures taken to protect students in the bathrooms, halls, etc."

Says a 12th-grader: "Security is necessary. But it's on the verge of being carried too far."

Some are plainly offended by the system. Says one 11th-grader: "The only thing that this school needs to be exactly like a prison is electric fences."

The signal that a security agent is needed is one bell, sounded throughout the school by a control device in the school's main office. One hears it periodically during the day, and it is a somewhat ominous sound. Everyone knows that there is a problem, and maybe trouble.

On an overcast Monday in December, Hamilton High's two security agents, Johnny O. Nevels and Arnold Tanner, make their campus rounds.

Nevels, at Hamilton for two years now, is a former sheriff's deputy. Tanner, also a former sheriff's deputy, has been at Hamilton less than a year. In two months, he will take another assignment and be replaced by a new agent.

Both are armed, but neither can recall drawing their guns while on the job at Hamilton.

Nevels is pointedly proud that he and his partner have a reputation of running a tough shop.

"We don't slap them on the hand, put it that way. If they're definitely wrong, they'll be booked." He says that keeps troublemakers away from Hamilton.

Friendly Relationship

But both also work hard at mingling on a friendly basis with students, knowing a surprising number by their first names, and are occasionally hit up for small loans (a dime a student needs for a phone call or loose change for lunch) which are invariably repaid.

During the year, they or city police

have made 68 arrests on or about the Hamilton campus. That is about 20% fewer than the prior year, something that is taken as an optimistic sign.

About three-fourths of those arrested are Hamilton students. The arrests are categorized by offense: burglary, theft, robbery, assault, narcotics, arson, threats and malicious mischief, and loitering and trespassing.

Breakdown of Offenses

Scanning crime reports over a several-months period, some of the statistics come to life:

—A girl called out of a classroom by three other girls, who then assaulted the first girl. The incident stemmed from a personal dispute.

—A 16-year-old arrested for selling pills from his automobile near the school.

—A robbery at the bicycle rack in which a boy refused to give money to his assailants and was beaten.

—Two junior high youngsters who lost money to some youthful extortionists.

—A burglary at the campus snack bar (known as the "hash house") in which five boxes of potato chips, 96 chocolate ice cream bars, six malts and three boxes of assorted cookies were taken.

Drug-connected arrests are down, and Nevels believes it reflects a general reduction in the use of drugs by students. Others at the school believe similarly.

But some students will say this is a misreading of the situation, that students have simply become more cautious about using drugs at the school.

Reaction to Pills

(Later in the day, a girl is helped from the school cafeteria, a troubled look on her face, half-coherent from the pills she has swallowed. She is taken to the nurse's office to await the arrival of her parents. But the girl, apparently fearful of what her parents will do, slips out of the office and flees: the campus. Nevels and Tanner search the surrounding neighborhood for her, but to no avail.)

The school has had no armed robberies this year, but did have one last year. A Hamilton student (later arrested) armed with a toy pistol



PRECAUTION—Hamilton student's ID card is checked by a hall guard, a measure to keep out-



siders away. Right, Boys Vice Principal Leonard George, school's symbol of discipline, with student. Times photos by Joe Kennedy

held up another student who was walking across campus with the day's receipts from the hash house.

There has been one fire so far this year, and Nevels believes the arsonist was after records in the counseling office.

Over the two-year period he has been at Hamilton, Nevels can recall three attempted assaults on teachers and one actual assault (two brothers who jumped a teacher who had separated them).

Weapons seem no to be a major problem. "Once in a while you get a switchblade from a guy," says Nevels.

(But there are occasional gun scares. In the spring, a security agent will be summoned to a classroom to take what is believed to be a gun away from a student. It turns out to be a very realistic water pistol.)

The symbol of discipline at Hamilton High is Leonard George, the boys' vice principal, 14 years in the city school system as an administrator and teacher (physical education, social studies and English), an ex-military policeman, a physical education major at the Virginia college he attended on an athletic scholarship. He has been at Hamilton one year.

He is much admired by teachers for his firm line on discipline. Says one: "It used to be if you said to a student, 'If you don't knock it off, I'll send you to the vice principal's office,' he would say, 'I'll go.' But now he shapes up."

(My philosophy is, I try to prevent things from happening," says George.)

He is a less admired figure to a good many students, especially those who end up in his office.

In a way, Hamilton High resembles a large pipeline.

At the incoming end is the pupil attendance office, trying to make sure that students enrolled at Hamilton actually show up for classes. At the outgoing end are the boys' and girls' vice principals, dispatching errant or troubled youths from the school, either temporarily or permanently.

Hamilton's daily absentee rate is 150 to 200, most of them judged legitimate. When Registrar David Rosenthal arrived two years ago, the daily rate was 400 to 450—another apparent indicator of the school's tighter administration.

A student who is absent is placed on a master absence list issued daily by Rosenthal's office. If the student

has not returned by the third or fourth day, his home is called. If the results of that are unsatisfactory and the student has not returned by the fifth day, Rosenthal sends his assistant out to "make a case," meaning a visit to the home or other investigation.

Elsewhere in the same building, the two vice principals (upon whom the main disciplinary load falls) process their daily quota of problems.

Extreme Measure Is Expulsion

The weightiest tool at their disposal is expulsion (which requires concurrence from the school district itself).

That has been used sparingly at Hamilton. In the past 12 years, four students have been expelled—one for arson resulting in \$55,000 damage to the administration building, two for assaulting a teacher, and one for possession of narcotics for sale.

The device used more frequently is suspension, a short-term (usually, a few days) exile which requires a visit to the school by parents before the student may return.

Students are suspended for such

infractions as smoking on campus or fighting.

(While students view suspension as punishment, administrators insist its main purpose is to get parents into the school for a conference. "In a lot of cases, that's the only way you can get parents in," says one.)

Hamilton suspended 211 of its students this year, about 9% of the total student body.

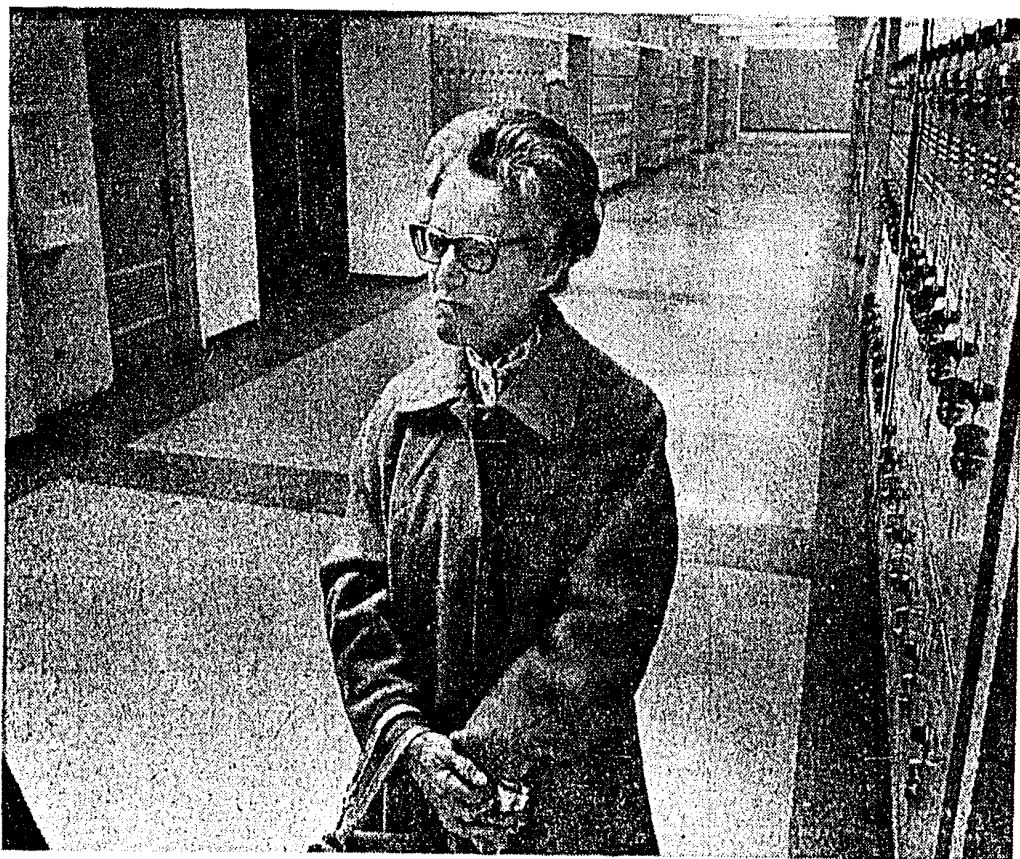
A third device which gets considerable use is the opportunity transfer, a euphemism for transfer to another school for a 10-week or one-semester period.

This year, Hamilton sent 83 of its students (about 4% of the enrollment and double last year's total) on opportunity transfers. These transfers are given for such infractions as narcotics use, repeatedly smoking on campus, fighting and extortion or strong-arm tactics.

There is an admitted ambivalence about how effective this measure is.

"I think it helps in lots of cases," says an assistant vice principal. "In lot of cases, it doesn't help at all."

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KEEPING WATCH—A neighborhood woman, who serves as a hall aide, is part of the security system.

HAMILTON HIGH

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It is defended on a variety of grounds. It can be used to break up and scatter to different schools a band of youngsters bent on trouble. It can remove a youngster from the influence of others who may be leading him into trouble. It can protect a youngster who has become the target of other students by moving him out of their reach.

'Second Chance'

Its main defense seems to be as a "second chance" for a student in trouble and saddled with the reputation of a troublemaker. "He has an opportunity to start off fresh where no one knows him," says one administrator.

But all these defenses do not erase the disturbing impression that the opportunity transfer for too many students is just a circuitous route to nowhere.

Schools negotiate with each other over opportunity transfers (for no school is bound to accept another school's transfer, and the student may be shipped back to his sending school if the receiving school decides it doesn't want him.)

There is no readily available data on how many opportunity transfer students are repeaters, but enough instances crop up to suggest the number is considerable.

Multiple Moves

(One case at Hamilton illustrates this. An 11th-grader at Los Angeles High was sent to Dorsey High on an opportunity transfer. His parents, to avoid Dorsey, moved into the Hamilton district. Hamilton accepted him as a student in its continuation school, but he was caught smoking marijuana and taking money from a girl. Hamilton sent him to Dorsey on an opportunity transfer. Then Dorsey said it was sending him back because of poor attendance. Now his mother and the family's social worker think he would do better at Crenshaw High. So Hamilton will negotiate with Crenshaw to see if that school will take him.)

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The youngster seated before the boys' vice principal has been absent 31 days and tardy nine days. "What's the problem?" the vice principal asks. "Just get up late," the boy re-

plies, in a barely audible voice.

He says he has no alarm clock and his parents are still in bed when it is time for school and nobody wakes him. The vice principal tells him to bring his parents for a conference.

"Did you show them your report card?" asks the vice principal.

"Yes," says the boy.

"What did they say about it?"

"Nothing."

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On conclusion is incapable: that Hamilton High has too few tools with which to meet many of the problems that are deposited each day in the vice principals' offices.

(Next: The System and Hamilton High.)