

Kennedy at a Crossroads: The Quest to Improve Safety in a Bronx High School

By Siobhan Skye Rohde

The March morning began as most do at John F. Kennedy High School. Hundreds of students crowded the halls of the school located in the West Bronx as soon as the end-of-class bell rang.

Most boys wore yellow and black do-rags or baseball hats pulled low over their eyes. Students—most black or Hispanic—gathered in groups, talking loudly between classes by the lockers, which had thick wire twisted through the lock holes to keep them closed. One couple kissed long and hard outside a classroom door, the boy slipping his hands into the back pockets of his girlfriend's jeans.

A fight erupted in an instant. Two 9th grade boys shouted insults nose-to-nose, shoving each other off balance. The students were not spitting raps, rhyming insults back and forth in an effort to outdo each other. Instead, tempers flared, and students circled around them, blocking off the stairwell and urging them on. Two security guards grabbed one kid and hustled him downstairs. Two other guards stayed with the teenager on the fifth floor, shooing onlookers back to class.

Similar episodes of escalating violence the previous fall semester prompted the Bronx Superintendent of High Schools to declare a "state of emergency" at the school last October.

Teachers and union members at the 4,200-seat school in Marble Hill had complained earlier about students disturbing classes, lounging in the hallways, and getting into fights. As a result, Principal Ken Harvey doubled the number of security personnel after the holiday break to 18 officers. He has plans to install a new \$80,000 high-tech ID card entry system for students, and continues his push for metal detectors at the entrances on the first and fourth floors.

"If I don't do it and something happens, it would really be a problem," Harvey said.

Safety in public schools became a national concern after several high-profile school shootings, including the 1999 killings at Columbine High School that left 15 dead. In January 2002 a student at Manhattan's Martin Luther King High School shot two teens, leaving them seriously wounded.

Schools in the city and around the nation instituted an array of new security measures, from metal detectors to full-school lockdowns. In New York City, the Police Department

took over school safety from the Board of Education in December 1998. New York State initiated the SAVE legislation in 2001, which requires students to serve suspensions inside school instead of home, until a conference is held between teachers, administrators, parents and the student.

The statistics are telling. Kennedy's suspension rate in 2001 was 3.16 percent, around half the similar schools' rate (7.34 percent) and the citywide rate (5.77 percent). But the rate of police department incidents per student was 7.2 percent in 2001, more than double that at similar schools (3.37 percent) and almost triple the citywide rate (2.57 percent). In 2001, more than four-fifths of Kennedy students were eligible for free lunch, a significantly higher poverty indicator than the 51.3 percent eligible in New York City schools.

Kennedy's internal unrest parallels citywide averages. New statistics released by the New York Police Department show that major crime in city schools between July 1, 2001 and March 20 was up 6.6 percent compared to the same period the year before. Lesser crimes - including misdemeanor assault, petty larceny, sex offenses and bomb threats - increased 11 percent during that time. This contrasted the 8 percent drop in school crime between July and December 2001 compared to the same period the year before.

Despite growing attention paid to school safety, few Kennedy officials agree on the causes of it or solutions to it. The principal's attempts to quell violence with added security measures were met with mixed reviews at Kennedy High School. Harvey believes his actions will help keep "attitudes of the street" from infiltrating the eight-story building. Teachers blame the student unrest on bureaucratic chaos in the city and school administrations. The students complain that the security guards are not doing their jobs.

Still, Principal Harvey said unequivocally, "I think it's basically a safe school." The sentiment is echoed by almost everybody working in or attending the school.

Kennedy High School dwarfs the houses and apartment buildings around it. It has a beautiful football field and all-weather track, but the glass is missing from the panes in some of the stairwell landings. Classes often have more than 30 students. The 231 teachers and 46 administrators gather in lounges and department offices. Deans and security guards wander around the halls with walkie-talkies during class periods, checking students' schedules and sending them to class, the cafeteria, the deans' office or home. Harvey is the school's fourth principal since 1992. This is part of a constant shifting in leadership that has led to a sense of instability.

Harvey came to Kennedy in February 2001. He said Wechsler visited the school last October to help develop a plan to stop fights and disturbances, class cutting and

marijuana smoking in the halls. Superintendent Wechsler declined to respond to questions about the situation.

"He felt the halls were out of control," said Harvey. "Subsequent to that, we've had a change in the supervisor of security." The school's security staff has also doubled.

"It was never an issue of the kids being wild and out of control, but they were taking advantage of the situation," said Harvey. "I think teenagers need direction, and they were looking to the school for that."

Teachers at Kennedy tended to place blame for the situation on the shoulders of administrators in the city school system, going all the way to the Board of Education headquarters at 110 Livingston St. They noted that students frequent the halls at Kennedy during class periods, some cutting class and others opting not to spend their free periods in the cafeteria or library, as required.

Dean Steve Goldman, who has taught at Kennedy since 1977, said that cutting class leads to more serious problems. He remembered the old "three minute rule," when teachers closed their doors three minutes after the bell rang and the school called students' parents after one or two cuts. But, said Goldman, Schools Chancellor Harold Levy ordered teachers to let students into class regardless of when they arrived.

"That came right from the Chancellor, and unfortunately we weren't going to disrespect the Chancellor," said Goldman. "We used to have kids running to class to get there on time, and that was nice because it meant something to them."

Dean Kenny Kaplan complained that the school had no lateness policy to handle kids in the halls. He called it a "revolving door process." The administration cannot switch problem students to other schools therefore suspension is the only option.

"The main problem is the fact that students who are suspended are still within their own element," Kaplan said. "Once the suspension is over, they're back with their friends, cutting classes. They need to transfer some of the kids to other schools."

Goldman said one potential danger for teachers has existed for a while. "We have a number of rooms where the telephones do not work or the receivers were stolen," he said. "Also, there are some phones that have been incapacitated because we went online." This has been brought to the union chapter chairperson's attention, he said.

Jessica Goring, a history teacher for the last five years, said that although she feels safe at Kennedy now, she did not always. "There was a time last semester when I was cautious

about when I'd cross floors," she said. "Other years they've had problems, but I never felt like it had anything to do with me."

Students used to set fires in garbage cans that have since been removed from the hallways. The head of the business department was carried out of school on a stretcher last year after she was trampled by a group of 10 or 15 kids running in the hallway. "Rumor has it she had a footprint on her back," Goring said.

Many Kennedy teachers said they felt stepped on by the administration. Budget cuts over the last few years have forced everyone - including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals and security aides - to take on added duties. One teacher filed a grievance with the United Federation of Teachers complaining that Kennedy teachers had to cover extra classes and patrol the halls, according to Goldman.

"The biggest factor is that the staff is overworked with the caseloads," Kaplan said. "Guidance counselors, social workers-"

"And teachers," Goring added.

"And absences are really a problem," Kaplan said. "Kids are absent 16 to 20 times [a year] here." According to Board of Education statistics, Kennedy students attended school 84.4 percent of the time, slightly less than the citywide rate of 85.9 percent.

Goldman said that teachers at Kennedy must juggle a number of roles at once. "You've got to be psychologist, judge, mother and father to these kids," he said. "It's totally different from when we were in school."

Many teachers said they tried to maintain their sense of humor to keep from feeling overwhelmed by the emotional and physical baggage the kids brought to school.

"I found a box cutter on the floor of my room the other day, which was good because it saved me a trip to Home Depot," said Brian Meany, a history teacher.

Kennedy students regularly laughed out loud when the topic of school safety arose. Most of the teenagers' problems were with security guards, they said. Guards often worked in groups rather than alone in the halls where they were supposed to be stationed. Some students complained about male guards flirting with female students. Others felt the guards were too friendly with all students.

Anthony Omokha, a junior, said the guards' treatment of students was based on favoritism. "It's all who you know," he said, shaking his head. "It's politics."

"The security guards stop you for silly reasons but let others go who they know are doing wrong," said Roy Wilson, also a junior. He paused for a moment. "The new guards, a lot are scared of the students. The old guards, they're friendly. There's no in-between."

Some students said the security staff and the administration focused their attention on the wrong concerns. "They're putting too much effort into kids taking hats off instead of getting kids into class," said Jeronimo Maradiaga, a junior.

As he left class after the bell rang, one junior turned and whispered, "I could bring a gun to school and nobody would notice."

But Terri Roberts, an outspoken junior, said most fights occur off campus after school. "In this school building I feel pretty safe. I've never gotten into a fight. Outside it's a different story."

"We're not here to criminalize children," said New York Police Department Sgt. Osborne Frazier at a PTA meeting attended by Principal Harvey and about 50 parents in March. "We're here to create that environment where kids feel safe. Where teachers feel safe."

He and three other school safety officers demonstrated a new metal detector for the parents. Frazier said the machine, when fully calibrated, can detect a razor blade under the tongue, in the hair, under the arm or between the thighs.

"We're picking up weapons," said Artie Cruz, the police officer in charge of school safety in the Bronx. "The signs are there, and God forbid somebody's going to get hurt." Cruz said knives, razors, box cutters and stun guns had been found at Kennedy this year.

"I'd rather see the bucks go toward science and math, expansion projects, chemistry labs," Frazier said. "But we can clearly document the need for this."

Parents' reactions to the new equipment were mixed. Some worried about their children facing long waits outside the school to go through the metal detector. Others asked about radiation from the x-ray machines and whether the doors on the first floor would also have detectors.

"Sometimes I worry about the weapons, but the majority of times I'm comfortable," said Marcia Vantull, a PTA member.

"I agree," said Rosie Jimenez, the PTA president. "I'm concerned about the time it's going to take."

Others realized the machines were now a necessity.

"Sometimes people might rebel against what's being done," said Evadne Haughton, mother of a Kennedy student. "I have no problem with it. Last week I went to Manhattan and I had to go through a metal detector to get into a building. Why not do that for a school?"

Jimenez believes the metal detectors are not necessary because safety at the school is improving. "My daughter says it's a lot better. She noticed it. When a kid notices it, that's something."

Ivelisse Marte, a senior at Kennedy, said there is still room for improvement. "I think that now it's better than before, but still happens bad things, like a lot of fights," she said in broken English. "No, I don't feel safe, because it's dangerous. Anything can happen. The teachers are good. It's the students who make it bad."

For Carlos Sosa, a senior, the problem boils down to one issue. "The biggest problem is just the respect. There's no respect," he said matter-of-factly. "They're doing the wrong approach. They just bring in the police, and that's not the way to do it."

Asked the solution to the problem, Sosa thought for a moment. "More enforcement, but not drastic. Just enforcement. And set the rules so students know what they are."