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Hilton Nelson, head of Park West High School program in English as a second language, talking to students staging a sit-in.

Knives and Guns in the Book Bags Strike Fear in a West Side School

By JANE PERLEZ

At Park West High School, a forbidding concrete structure in the heart of Hell's Kitchen, students have assaulted and robbed each other, stealing jewelry, coats and radios, since the start of the school year. Violence erupts over even such trifling items as train passes.

Last week the violence reached a new high: just after the end of the school day, one block away, a 17-year-old student pulled out a machete and severely slashed another student, the police said. The assailant has been charged with attempted murder.

Death Threat

At the same time, detectives were seeking a 14-year-old Park West student they said held a gun to the head of another student near the school and threatened to kill him because he was cooperating with a police investigation of a robbery.

"In 18 years in public education, I've never seen anything like this on a daily basis — where girls get robbed, kids get knifed out of school and bring out their knives in school," said Nancy Casey, a guidance counselor at Park West who last year was selected as "guidance

counselor of the year" by the Board of Education.

The director of the board's office of school safety, Bruce A. Irushalmi, called the level of violence at Park West "very disturbing" and said the number of weapons "used inside and outside the school is excessive."

In the first month of the school year, the city's high schools had four incidents of students shooting at each other, an unprecedented number, Mr. Irushalmi said.

To the 66-year-old principal of Park West, Edward Morris, the school is safe and the level of violence is nothing new.

"We're dealing with all the malaise of society and 3,000 individuals," said Mr. Morris, who has been principal since the school opened in 1978. "The school is a microcosm of society."

"Kids have been bringing weapons to school for years," he said. "It's almost a habit to carry weapons. This is not unique to Park West."

But yesterday, in an unusual expression of anger at the violence, several hundred students — many of them newly arrived from the Dominican Republic — staged an all-day sit-in on



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Edward Morris, the principal of Park West High School.

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the third floor, where they take courses in English as a second language. They said they would not attend class until Mr. Morris met their demands, which include better security in the school. The principal met in his office with some of the protesters.

Knives of all descriptions, machetes and a loaded .22-caliber pistol have been found under students' belts, in pockets and inside book bags by school security officers who search students of whom they are suspicious. A cache of three knives, a meat cleaver and brass knuckles was uncovered in a student's bag during a search last month.

A student found with a knife or gun is subject to suspension, Mr. Irushalmi said.

Police Cars at Entrance

Virtually every day, squads of Board of Education school safety officers are dispatched to the school to augment the 10 officers permanently stationed there. Police cars are a common sight at the entrance of the school, at 10th Avenue and 50th Street in Manhattan.

Some teachers estimate that the majority of Park West students carry weapons of some kind. For their part, the students say they need the weapons for protection.

A police officer who arrested a student at the school yesterday for showing a six-inch knife in an art class said the student, when asked why he carried it, replied, "My neighborhood, man."

But other students say they bring knives to school because they know others bring them. Parents often encouraged their children to come to school armed, Ms. Casey said, because "they feel they can't be protected there."

Asking for a Transfer

Out of fear, at least a dozen students have asked to be transferred from the school, which has specialties in catering and computer technology.

For example, Miguel Cruz, 18 years old, a good student with grades in the 80's for math and science, was in sight of graduation. But he left Park West last month for a general equivalency diploma course because he said he was afraid. When he went to Park West he carried a knife.

"Everybody was going to school with a knife," said Mr. Cruz, adding that he was tired of having his gold chains and other "nice things" taken. "I was going to school with a knife because the others always went to school with a knife."

Of the approximately 3,000 students from all over the city enrolled at the school — fewer than 2,500 a day attend — about 200 to 300 are Dominicans. The rest of the enrollment is divided about equally between black students and those of Puerto Rican background, said Philip Schrank, assistant principal for security.

'We're Not Doing Our Job'

A "certain amount of racial misunderstanding" compounded the problems in the school, he said.

But to many of the staff, particularly teachers who have recently arrived at Park West and most of whom declined to be identified, the school's top administration has shown weak leadership.

"It's happening because we're not doing our job," said Ms. Casey, a veteran of three city high schools with tough student populations. "The school is not providing an environment where the students can develop and grow, morally, intellectually and physically. When adolescent boys have nothing else to do, they're scared to death of fights and they're tremendously frustrated."

The dean of the English department, Mort Forest, said the increase in the number of violent incidents has "been upsetting."

"I'm not defending the school," he said. "It has problems. More action has to be taken."

"Kids are not even missed when they are not here," said an experienced teacher, new to the school, who declined to be identified because he did not have tenure. "We're never going to

get anywhere unless we admit we have a problem. The principal and his assistant principals won't admit it."

When told that some teachers had been asked about the school's leadership, Mr. Morris interjected, "They said we were too good for the students."

When told that some teachers felt there was a lack of leadership in the school, he replied, "That's nonsense."

The school's administration, teachers said, has not taken care of relatively simple matters that would help engage the students. They listed such things as not insuring there were needed repairs in the gymnasium, where up to 300 students are scheduled

in some periods; by not ordering more seats for the cafeteria, where students have to stand, and by allowing the halls to remain "out of control" with roaming students during class time.

Further, these teachers said, the students have few easily accessible lockers to hang their winter coats and keep their belongings: thus many walk around school all day with heavy, expensive leather coats slung around their shoulders.

Jeffrey Zerowin, an assistant principal at Park West since its inception, said a motorized part to allow a wall in the gymnasium to be swung back had been on order since July. Cafeteria seats were on order for more than a

year, he said.

The lockers in the corridors had been barred from student use since the school opened, he said, because they were built into narrow alcoves that were easy places for students to steal from each other as they delved into the lockers.

A more deep-seated problem, some of the staff said, is the lack of teachers from minority groups that the students could regard as role models. Of about 196 professional staff members at the school, only 26 are from minority groups, according to a staff roster.

Mr. Zerowin blamed the division of personnel for the lack of teachers from minority groups.