

GUEST EDITORIAL

Schools Surrounding Tragedy

By JERRY CAMMARATA

The morning walk to school. A time for parents and children to enjoy the fresh air and carry on conversation about the day, school work, or even random chit chat.

On September 11th at PS 234, two blocks from the World Trade Center (WTC), dozens of parents and children were approaching the school at 8:48 AM. Suddenly, they witnessed a plane crash directly into the Twin Towers! The rest of their lives will never be the same!

Within five minutes of the first crash, I was on the scene and rushed to PS 234, only to find chaos. Young and old, teachers and cafeteria workers tried to keep order in an event which had no disaster plan. Parents wanted to get out of the building and go home with their children; a sound idea to walk north, away from the twin towers.

As many of the parents and children were leaving the building and looking up at the towers, they again saw a plane crash into the WTC. Beyond belief! What to do? Where can you go for safety?

This story for the most part, played out in all the schools surrounding the WTC: PS/IS 89, PS 150, PS 234, PS 721M, Stuyvesant HS, HS of Economics and Finance, and the Murry

Bergtraum HS. With all the devastation, to my knowledge, all our children, parents, teachers and staff, left safely.

Today, it gives us pause. Should we be doing a risk assessment about where are schools are and what potential dangers could take place? Clearly, the Chancellor has indicated he will be reviewing the security of our schools.

With the Board of Education intact, however and soot-covered school buildings around the WTC remaining, the bigger challenge for us now is to engage in those conversations that address the what, where, why and how of it all. The grief counselors in our schools have been consuming volumes of time each and every day since the tragedy to provide help to those who cannot cope and even to those who think they are coping, yet still need the shoulder of a professional.

At a time like this, the New York City Board of Education will serve a very important role in preserving the human dignity and psychological welfare of its students. President Bush has praised our system for staying open and said Chancellor Levy proved that America's, "most important domestic priority"—education—could not be halted.

The WTC tragedy reached beyond the schools of NYC. As reported by the New York State School Board Association, Education Commissioner Richard P. Mills issued an advisory indicating he thought it was unwise to send children home to empty homes; many firefighters, police officers and commuters working in NYC live in Orange County and on Long Island. And, in the Locust School District of Nassau County, a teacher was assigned to each school bus to assure adult supervision was available in the homes.

What took place on September 11th is a part of our lives in real time. Next year it will be a part of our textbooks and a chapter in American history. #

Jerry Cammarata is the Commissioner of Youth Services and a member of the NYC Board of Education.