Peers help school to be a safe haven
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People told David Martinez to expect trouble when he first entered Horace Mann Middle School in San Diego's tough City Heights neighborhood. The school, they warned him, has "a lot of problems."

Not only did David discover the message to be untrue, he volunteered for a team that strives to preserve the school as a safe haven and a place where any student can overcome barriers to learning.

Now an eighth-grader, David is among a group of positive role models called PALs -- Peer Active Listeners -- whose duties include tutoring struggling classmates, keeping an eye on trouble and serving as guides to new students and substitute teachers.

Julie Elliott, principal for the last four years, said the peer program and a variety of other proactive efforts have made Horace Mann a success story in coping with the grind of problems faced by urban schools.

"Step by step, we've built a structure and organization that really works," Elliott said yesterday. "The whole structure of this school is built around meeting the needs of these kids."

But two days of bungled news reporting left some Horace Mann officials wondering whether the school would ever receive credit for its work.

Yesterday, the biggest problem was a photo caption for a San Diego Union-Tribune article. It incorrectly stated that the stack of guns, knives and other weapons shown to Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who paid a visit to draw attention to the soon-to-be-signed federal crime bill, were recovered from Mann students. They were not.

A day earlier, The New York Times said that Mann lockers had just been removed to eliminate hiding places for guns and other weapons. The lockers actually have been gone for at least nine years, Elliott said, and the action had more to do with problems of vandalism, contraband and tardiness.

"We don't have guns," Elliott said. "Most of our (weapons) incidents are dealt with so rapidly that it's not a major issue."

Violence and ethnic gang activity have escalated severely in the City Heights community in recent years. Police helicopters circle overhead almost every weekend, and Mann students say they sometimes can hear gunfire.
But eighth-grader Vansha Vo, part of the PAL corps, said that in school, "I feel safe around here."

The year-round school, which serves the sixth through eighth grades with a teaching staff of around 100, is projected to pass the 2,000-student mark this year. All the students live in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Elliott said Mann adhered to a zero-tolerance approach to weapons and violence long before it became common practice, developing a consistently enforced and strongly supervised discipline policy.

"Everyone is trained in it. We've put a lot of time, effort and money into making sure everybody knows what the parameters are and, by enforcing those, the kids seem really happy," she said.

"The No. 1 rule is 'follow directions,' " Elliott said. "It's not punitive -- it (emphasizes) a chance to change behavior with known consequences."

The school also has tight controls on gang-related clothing, colors and signs -- phoning parents when necessary to put a stop to it. Despite the surroundings, students report that gang activity generally does seem to stop at the schoolyard gates.

As illustrated by the PAL program and its seventh-grade counterpart, Natural Helpers, the school also relies heavily on students to help one another.

Justin Salsman, one of the 25 eighth-grade PALs, said the volunteers all pledge "to help, to solve problems, to teach, to listen, to provide a safe and caring school and community and to be a positive role model."

Counselor Jill O'Kane said PALs eventually are trained as conflict mediators, sitting down with students who have been fighting or experiencing other problems. The mediators don't try to provide advice so much as suggestions, O'Kane said. Then they get the adversaries to sign a contract outlining a solution to their dispute.

"When they have peers sitting there with them," said O'Kane, "it amazes me how well it works."

Vansha and other students say they also benefit from some of the most dedicated teachers they've ever met. Teachers usually are willing to help with any problem, they report.

Like most urban public schools in California, Horace Mann has enough of a challenge simply dealing with language and cultural barriers.

Current students speak at least 27 languages, and about seven of every 10 students did not learn English as their first language. A sudden influx of Somali immigrants was
absorbed just within the past few years; the latest wave is composed of Haitians.

The school has built a team of translators to work with parents, drawing heavily from grant funding.

The school faces a continuing shortage of reading and other instructional materials in non-English languages, but Elliott said teachers create their own materials every day.

"We've used any money we can get our hands on to find material that these kids could read," she said. "We've hired aides who speak all the different languages that we need. Our teaching staff also has some language diversity."

Horace Mann also is part of a program based at Crawford High School that uses a state "Healthy Start" grant to provide a variety of social services to students and parents, including job counseling and medical needs. The school also has a partnership with several community organizations to work with parents.

Caption: 1 PIC
They're all PALs: These PALs serve as tutors for students and as argument-resolvers at Horace Mann Middle School. They are (from left) Vansha Vo, David Martinez and Justin Salsman. (B-1:1,7,8; B-3:2,3,4,5; B-2:6)
Memo: Head varies

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