In the playground behind Alexander Hamilton Elementary School, children talk excitedly about gang fights, stabbings and menacing strangers with bravado undercut by fear.

"One day I seen the cops push fat Davey and a couple other dudes up against the wall over there 'cause they was talkin' to a dealer," said 9-year-old Ronald, a fourth-grader at Hamilton.

"But I wasn't scared," he said, hooking his thumbs into the front of his blue jeans. "'Cause I rule this school."

"You're a fool, my man," a friend said. "Ain't nobody rules this school."

Hamilton serves the City Heights area of East San Diego. Once a community of neatly kept single-family homes, the neighborhood today is dominated by low-income apartments and public housing projects.

On more than one occasion, police have raided suspected crack houses directly across the street from Hamilton’s campus, where more than 1,200 students attend classes in facilities built to accommodate 750.

Gang members regularly scrawl graffiti on the school grounds, as a reminder of their presence and power in the neighborhood. And just as regularly, school officials armed with brushes and buckets apply a fresh coat of paint.

"I've never been to a school like Hamilton -- it's quite a challenge," said school principal Carrie Peery.

That challenge extends well beyond the campus, Peery said.

"I used to feel that, as a principal, I was the curriculum leader for the school, but now I find I'm doing more work in the community."

An educator since 1970, Peery has been principal at Hamilton for the past four years.

"In many respects, Hamilton has become a social service agency," she said. "Everything seems to be coming onto the school."

Faced with an expanded role in their student's lives, school officials are banking on a pilot program designed to coordinate the energies of social service agencies, and focus those energies on schools like Hamilton.
New Beginnings involves the county Health Services Department, the Probation Department, the Community College District and San Diego city schools.

In July, the Stuart Foundation awarded a $45,000 grant for a feasibility study focusing on Hamilton as a test site for the program. The study is expected to be completed by March 1990. Program coordinators describe Hamilton as an ideal test site.

The majority of students at the school are from single-parent households. More than 90 percent of the children are eligible for the school's free- and reduced-cost lunch programs, which are funded by the federal government for the children of low-income families.

On Hamilton's eastern front, portable classrooms -- some of which date to the 1940s -- perch on the edge of a canyon that teachers say is infested with crack dealers. Beyond the school grounds, several burned-out buildings cling to the canyon walls. The area is littered with castoffs -- abandoned cars, rusted shopping carts, scattered piles of garbage.

"This is what I call being in the trenches, and we literally get dirty," Peery said.

"On many occasions, I've had to confront gang members on the school grounds and try to negotiate with them in order to get rid of them. I usually come out of it pretty well, but it's a little scary sometimes.

"In a very real sense, we're out here by ourselves," she said.

Changes in the neighborhoods surrounding Hamilton are reflected in the student population, which has doubled in the past six years as single-family homes were replaced by higher density housing.

The school's ethnic profile also has been altered. The proportion of black and Hispanic students has grown from about 50 percent in 1984 to more than 70 percent today. Indochinese students, who in 1984 made up about 15 percent of the enrollment at Hamilton, now account for about 25 percent of the students.

Today, more than 21 languages are spoken at Hamilton.

School officials have created a variety of programs designed to meet the needs of a student population that is largely in flux -- and often in crisis.

Teachers involved in the school's basic skills program work with parents who are unable to help their children with homework. Parents whose children are abusing drugs or alcohol can get help through the school's Collaboration on Drug Education (CODE) program. And at Quality Circle meetings, parents can meet with teachers and talk about the problems they're facing at home.
In addition to teachers who are, in effect, on call to deal with children and parents under stress, the school employs an outreach counselor to work with troubled families.

An after-school activities program operated jointly by the school and the city's Parks and Recreation Department offers children an alternative to the often-mean streets of City Heights -- until 6 p.m.

But those efforts have failed to reach into many of the homes where Hamilton students live.

"We see a lot of parents who are into drugs and alcohol," said Claudia Hildreth, school nurse at Hamilton.

"We've got kids as young as 6 or 7 who are literally trying to take care of themselves," said Hildreth, 51. "They come to school unbathed, unfed and afraid. That's the reality they're dealing with every day."

With its emphasis on combining the services of several social service agencies on the Hamilton campus, New Beginnings could offer alternatives to students, and some measure of relief for teachers, according to Ron Ottinger, a planner for San Diego city schools.

"We decided to focus on an elementary school, with the idea of providing intervention and prevention rather than recovery," Ottinger said.

"Hamilton is a good school for us to study because there is very little busing, so most of the kids live in the neighborhood. Also, our preliminary reports gave us some rather staggering numbers that indicate a real crisis facing the school."

Statistics provided by police and social service agencies offer a glimpse into the lives of many Hamilton students.

In a 50-block area surrounding the school, the rate of violent crimes, including murder, rape and armed robbery, was three times higher than the citywide average in 1988, according to law enforcement officials. Property crimes, such as burglary and car theft, were 20 percent higher than the citywide average.

Each month, on the average, Child Protective Services responds to more than 130 cases of child neglect in a 4-square-mile area surrounding Hamilton. Every month, the agency receives about 150 reports of physical and sexual abuse of children in the same area. Monthly, there are about 40 cases of "caretaker abandonment or incapacity" -- parents who either have left their children to fend for themselves or who are unable to care for them because of alcohol and drug abuse or emotional disability.

"The message behind New Beginnings is fairly simple," Ottinger said. "If the kids are
really going to be in a position to learn, we can't ignore the reality of the problems they're facing in their own homes. A kid who is sick or hungry, or whose parents are sick or on drugs, is not in a position to learn.

"We've always said that parents need to be involved in their children's education, but when you have a situation where a parent is failing to fulfill even the basic responsibilities to a child, there's got to be some sort of alternative for that child.

"We're trying to bring some stability to these kids' lives."

Caption: 1 PIC
A pupil's work sheet lies on the edge of a canyon reportedly infested with crack dealers.
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