Perched on the edge of a littered canyon that teachers say is infested with crack dealers, Alexander Hamilton Elementary School provides a textbook case of the effects of crime, poverty and overcrowded classrooms on student achievement.

Test scores at the East San Diego campus are chronically below citywide averages, and Hamilton has the lowest stability ranking of all 106 elementary sites in the San Diego school district.

"The need is tremendous," said Ron Ottinger, a planner for San Diego city schools. "These are children who live in very poor circumstances in an area that has one of the highest incidences of violent crime, the highest density and the fewest social services available in the city.

"But that doesn't mean that students don't come to school with a lot of strengths," Ottinger said. "And we're convinced we can build on those strengths with a new approach to teaching."

Toward that end, the San Diego school board today will consider adoption of a plan designed to link social services for Hamilton students and their families with a high-powered, individualized scholastic program.

The proposed Academic Achievement Academy would establish four autonomous schools at Hamilton to correspond to the school's multitrack schedule.

If approved by the school board, the academy will operate in conjunction with New Beginnings, a cooperative venture by county and school officials to focus the energies of social service agencies on school campuses.

The New Beginnings pilot program at Hamilton involves the county Health Services and Probation departments, the Community College District and San Diego city schools.

In July 1989 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 next month, Ottinger said.

With its emphasis on combining the features of several social service agencies on the Hamilton campus, New Beginnings is the first project of its kind in the San Diego school district.

On the academic side, a management team made up of teachers, counselors and parents would define goals for Hamilton's four schools.

"Our students come from various backgrounds, and many of them have learning styles that may differ from those of other students," said Hamilton principal Carrie Perry. "Our goal in setting up four schools will be to focus on the students’ specific goals in reading and writing, but to make that experience as rich and exciting as we can."
Under plans developed by Perry and her staff over the past two years, Hamilton Elementary would become Hamilton Academic Achievement Academy, offering curricula in four separate schools:

- The School of Creative Expression would emphasize writing, reading and speaking skills. Teachers would make use of special projects, learning centers and debates to encourage student achievement.

- Students in the School of Developmental Learning would have access to reading centers designed for children from a wide scope of ability levels. In "extended campus learning experiences," pupils would visit sites such as the Old Globe Theatre, museums and college science labs.

- The School of Bilingual Expression would offer instruction in both English and Spanish in an effort to broaden the cultural and academic experiences of students who speak either language. There are more than 500 students with limited English proficiency at Hamilton, according to district records.

- The School of Science and a Socially Responsible World would combine an in-depth study of science with instruction in reading, writing and language arts.

The underlying theme of the $150,000 pilot program is "individual, personalized attention," according to Ottinger.

"The tie-in with other agencies means that we'll be able to meet the unique social needs of these kids and their families while providing a different curriculum that meets their special academic needs," he said.

Hamilton serves the City Heights area of East San Diego.

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. Today more than 1,200 students attend classes at Hamilton in facilities built to accommodate 750.

"Our students come from a very mobile community that has a lot of problems," Perry said. "I'm convinced that the model we're proposing will enable us to reach those students. They're wonderful kids. I think they deserve this kind of creativity."