

PS 194 goes through a lesson in fear



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SHORTLY after 9 a.m., the principal charged into classrooms on the fourth floor of Harlem's PS 194.

"Line up the children, and bring them down to the auditorium," barked Principal Nina Powell.

Then, the kids heard administrative assistant Irving Blanks.

"Do not let the children drink from the water fountains," Blanks warned.

"Don't let them use the bathrooms."

It took only seconds for the neat rows of children to fall apart.

"Everybody was screaming," says fifth-grader Asia McNeil, who could hear the yelps from the first floor.

"They were running down the stairs," said Natalie Burgos, 10. "And the cops starting coming up the stairs."

This is how a routine morning at school turns into pandemonium. This is how a free society

The children were not immediately told this, but around 9 a.m., speech teacher Vladimir Kundel opened an envelope stuck in his mailbox in the fourth-floor faculty lounge. A white powder fell out, and onto his hands.

A female colleague was also in the lounge, but she didn't touch the powder. At one point, two children also walked into the room, but they soon left.

Within minutes, police cruisers, ambulances and Health Department vehicles clogged 135th Street. Some observers reported seeing men in gas masks. For a time, the fourth floor was sealed off.

Scared staff tried to reach parents by telephone.

"We've had an anthrax scare," the parents were told.

Yes, they used the A-word, the newest synonym for fear.

As the teacher who handled the suspicious envelope was taken to Bellevue Hospital for tests, parents streamed into school to retrieve their children.

At least 10 kids were taken to a local hospital for testing. Parents fretted about whether the school was safe.

Tests on the material won't be completed until today or tomorrow.

Some of the parents were

handed letters explaining what happened. But the letters ran out at one point, and parents were frantic.

"They're retaliating against my children," Kim Orgil, whose three children attend PS 194, said about some unnamed enemy.

"I'm considering taking them home, teaching myself."

Dad Anton Green believed the source of the scare must be closer to home than the Middle East.

"What terrorist knows about this school?" he asked.

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