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THE DAILY NEWS, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2001

Tough new questions for teachers

By ALISON GENDAR
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Teacher Nancy Meritt remembers exactly what she told her fifth-grade class at Public School 114 after the World Trade Center attack: *Don't worry, you're safe out here in the Rockaways.*

Yesterday, as investigators combed students' backyards for body parts and debris from American Airlines Flight 587, she struggled for new words to comfort her students.

"My own 18-year-old daughter was hysterical, saying, 'Mommy, you told us we were safe here,'" Meritt said as she hugged a little girl. "I'm not sure what to tell them now."

Meritt's struggle was played out in classrooms and at breakfast tables across the Rockaways yesterday, as parents and teachers tried to explain yet another tragedy to children still coping with the terror attacks of Sept. 11.

As with the Trade Center disaster, the impact of Monday's plane crash reverberated far beyond the epicenter.

Board of Education officials said three Bronx students died on the flight to the Dominican Republic. An estimated 20 students from Queens, Manhattan and the Bronx, as well as six school staffers, lost loved ones when the jet bound for the Dominican Republic slammed into the sedate Belle Harbor neighborhood.

"We thought we were getting through the tragedy, the funerals and the loss," said PS 114 Principal Gerard McCarthy, who said two students and six teachers and staff lost immediate family members Sept. 11. "Now we have this."

Students at PS 114 were enjoying a day off for the Veterans Day holiday when the jet broke apart only four blocks from the school. The other nearby school, St. Francis de Sales, remained closed. It was being used a staging area for the salvage effort.

"I thought it was an earthquake, then I went outside and saw the plane engine lying on the ground, not far from my house," said 12-year-old Jessica Maroney, who lives on Beach 129th St., across from the gas station where one of the jet's engines landed. "It was scary. It made the war seem like it was here."

Teachers arrived at the school an hour early yesterday to prepare for students' shock and grief. Only about 53% of PS 114's 825 students showed up for class. Attendance across the rest of city, however, was about average, despite fears that scores of children would stay home, as they did after Sept. 11.

Extra counselors were dispatched to PS 114 and the three other public elementary and middle schools on the peninsula and Beach Channel High School.

Students met in small groups to talk about what they saw and heard. Some drew pictures of nosediving jets and houses in flames. Others, guided by their teachers, wrote poems.

Schools Chancellor Harold Levy met with students and staff at the school and E-mailed every principal in the city, reminding them to be watchful for children who aren't coping well.

"Unfortunately," Levy said, "we are getting good at this."

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