

Violence sounds alarm at Oak Park High - Recent incidents stir fears, frustration around school

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OAK PARK -- The thunderous, rapid kicks in his sides were the last sensation Marty Taylor felt before losing consciousness.

The **Oak Park High** School custodian was randomly and brutally attacked by as many as 15 people as he crossed the school parking lot after a home football game Oct. 12.

He has recovered from his physical injuries but suffers from mental anguish.

"I feel very uncomfortable here, because I don't know who the people are who did this to me," said Taylor, 33. "But a parent has to do what they have to do to support their child."

The attack on Taylor is one of a series of violent incidents **at Oak Park High** in recent weeks that have left parents concerned, students fearful and administrators frustrated.

Since school began Sept. 4, the **Oak Park** police have been called to the school five times in cases involving fighting, drugs and weapons. On Halloween, police were called to the school twice and arrested 15 students -- one for carrying a knife so large it affected his gait, and the others for fighting and disorderly conduct. Administrators say the **high** school is no different from any other, but some teachers are concerned about their own safety, and students, who refuse to be identified for fear of retaliation, rattle off the names of gangs they say exist in the school. Many parents drive their children to and from school for safety.

"All the unnecessary drama going on -- there should be zero tolerance," said Hope Freeman of **Oak Park**, whose 15-year-old daughter Anna is a sophomore. "I think they need more security. The Detroit Public Schools have security guards and metal detectors. Maybe the school needs to beef up the security. The teachers can't be the muscle."

Teachers also are concerned about their safety. A mass, anonymous e-mail was circulated earlier this month requesting other teachers in the district to participate in a sick-out to protest what they said were dangerous conditions, among other issues.

Oak Park High teachers declined interviews, noting they were told all comments had to come from administration.

Administrators caution against painting the school with a broad stroke of **violence**. According to 12th-grade counselor Cheryl Glenn, 86 percent of the 235 students who graduated last spring went on to two-year or four-year colleges. Superintendent Sandra Harris said violent students are in the minority.

"Ninety-eight percent of our kids are good students, but you never hear anything about them," she said. "There's no more happening in **Oak Park** than anywhere else."

Further, Harris says she has cracked down on **violence** with increased expulsions in her three years as superintendent. Three students have been expelled this year and four more expulsion hearings are being held this week.

"There were 25 expulsions between 2005 and 2006, compared to zero in the year before I arrived," she said.

Lt. Mike Pousak of the **Oak Park** Police Department said the school district has been cooperative with his department.

"We have a good working relationship with the security staff at **Oak Park High School**," Pousak said. "They do a good job of keeping on top of things and they bring things to our attention when they need to."

Pousak and Harris say they cannot substantiate the charge of gang activity in the school, but students interviewed named the East Warren Boys, All About Money, the Crips, the Bloods, the Schoolcraft Boys and Family Above All.

There have been no arrests in the beating of Marty Taylor. Principal Lisa Philips said the attackers were not **Oak Park** students, even though it happened on school property.

Taylor disagrees.

"While I was being kicked, I heard someone say, 'Hey, that's the janitor.'"

But Taylor said some students did reach out to him.

"The principal came to my house with a collection taken up by some students, and a card with signatures," he said.

Students admit the school has problems, but point to its successes, including dedicated teachers, after-school tutoring programs and advanced placement classes.

Harris said the school has a zero tolerance policy, adding that security can only go so far.

"We have four administrators and eight security guards in that building," she said. "You can't expect 12 people to be the eyes and ears of the building all the time. Safety and security is everybody's business."

Ericka Jackson's 15-year-old son, Cortez West, was a victim of a beating by some **Oak Park High** students.

"Some students jumped him **at** the beginning of the school year," she said. "It involved a girl and some name-calling. I called the school about it, but they said they didn't see anything because it happened after school. We pray **at** night, and I tell him to watch his back before he goes to school each day."

Violence on campus

The **Oak Park** Police Department is across the street from **Oak Park High** School. According to Lt. Mike Pousak, the police made five runs to the **high** school between Sept. 10 and Oct. 31.

Sept. 10: A student with marijuana was arrested and released to his parents. He must appear in juvenile court.

Sept. 21: Another student was found with marijuana, was arrested and released to his parents.

Oct. 12: **At** 9:30 p.m. police were notified of a large group of people -- between 50 and 60 surrounding a custodian who was being beaten. Pousak said there's no way to determine exactly how many participated in the beating, or that they were **Oak Park** students because no arrests have been made. The case is under investigation.

Oct. 31: A student found with marijuana and a 12- inch long folded knife was arrested and charged with carrying a concealed weapon. He was arraigned and received personal bond of \$2,500 and released. Oct. 31: Police were called to the school again when a fight broke out in the cafeteria around 11 a.m. Eight students were arrested for fighting and six were arrested for disorderly conduct **at** dismissal time.

Caption: Mai Truong, center, and Miesha Mcpherson participate in a discussion of the play "Death of a Salesman" during an AP English class **at Oak Park High** . Since Sept. 4, the police have been called to the school five times. "I think they need more security," says Hope Freeman, whose 15-year-old daughter, Anna Freeman, is a sophomore **at Oak Park High** . AP English teacher Gayle Miller leads a discussion of the play "Death of a Salesman" **at Oak Park High** . 3

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