

# Violence at Fresno's Fort Miller Middle School worries teachers, parents

By Hannah  
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- Fresno Unified middle school suspensions, fall semester 2014

School	Suspensions
Ahwahnee	155
Baird	14
Bullard Talent	15
Computech	7
Cooper Academy	30
Fort Miller	305
Gaston	268
Kings Canyon	113
Scandinavian	115
Sequoia	63
Tehipite	101
Tenaya	60
Terronez	36
Tioga	114
Wawona	99
Yosemite	111

Source: Fresno Unified School District preliminary data

It was just after 2 p.m. on a Wednesday and Fort Miller Middle gym teacher Dot Van Duzer was at the school window, closely watching a line of school buses idling outside.

That's strange, she thought to herself, remembering the buses should have left already to take the school's sports teams to their afternoon games.

She tuned her walkie-talkie to hear the going-ons outside. She only heard terror on the other end.

"I turned to the channel they were on and a security officer and coach gave a description" of a teenager, a former student, walking toward campus with what looked like a 9 mm handgun. "I could hear (the security officer) say, 'He's

got a 9 mm Glock.' At that time I hear her say, 'I just heard it cocked and put into position.' I'm hearing it on the radio and they're not calling a lockdown."

The 13-year-old, who lived near campus, was spotted by students and staff carrying a pellet gun that Jan. 28 afternoon. It was designed to look like a real gun, and the teen's older brother told him to stop messing with it before he tore out of the house toward the school, Fresno Police Lt. Joe Gomez told The Bee this month. The boy ignored the warning.

The scare sent a shock wave through the already fractured Fort Miller school community, Van Duzer said. The boy didn't injure anyone and was never arrested, but teachers and parents were outraged the school never called a lockdown or shepherded students inside to safety.

"We don't feel safe here. I've had several parents take out their students ... put them on independent study," Van Duzer said. "They refuse (to bring them back) because they know their child is not safe."

The episode is only a small window into the school's recent descent into turmoil.

Fights, drugs in backpacks, and assaults on teachers and students have become endemic at the middle school located west of Blackstone and south of Dakota avenues.

Parents say rowdy children are disrupting class, bullying others and sparking fights daily. Last spring a 65-year-old teacher was assaulted by a 13-year-old. Police have been called to the school on at least two occasions in 2015, including one day in January when a teacher was allegedly poisoned. Two 12-year-old girls were arrested and charged with conspiracy and poisoning after allegedly pouring Visine eye drops into their teacher's water bottle, Gomez confirmed. They were later expelled, school officials said.

Some blame the problems on changes made three years ago.

Around that time, Fort Miller became the neighborhood school for a new group of students, youngsters who in past years would have gone to neighboring Cooper Middle. But a school board decision to convert Cooper into a specialized college-prep school meant students who didn't qualify would go elsewhere — and many ended up at Fort Miller.

The turbulence hasn't been without consequences. District officials say 17 teachers quit or were transferred to other teaching jobs last school year. Some parents have pulled their children from the school. District spokesman Jed Chernabaeff said 121 students transferred out of Fort Miller this school year. No students transferred in because the school already had high enrollment numbers.

The principal has been out on medical leave since November, leaving the school's two vice principals and a string of interim principals to handle the mess. They're being helped by school district officials, who have taken notice and pledged to boost resources. The district's instructional superintendent Katie Russell is on campus almost daily, teachers are getting extra training and a school resource police officer will be hired this spring.

But much of the assistance comes too late, frustrated parents and teachers say.

"My daughter comes home crying, she doesn't want to go to school," said Carmen Martinez, parent of Fort Miller eighth-grader Unique Martinez. "We need a security guard at school, we feel like we need cameras. There's just too much going on."

Two schools transformed

Fort Miller sits at the heart of Fresno, bounded by strip malls and inexpensive hotels along Blackstone to the east and urban neighborhoods to the west.

Eight elementary schools — Del Mar, Fremont, Heaton, Homan, Muir, Roeding, Williams and Wilson — feed into the school, the most elementaries to flow into a single middle school in all of Fresno Unified. About 870 students attended last school year and about 855 go there this year, school officials say.

It wasn't always this way: up until the 2012-13 school year, Fort Miller and Cooper Middle shared the flow of students from central Fresno elementaries.

But changes were in store for both schools a few years ago when district trustees redrew school boundaries to accommodate the new program at Cooper.

In a controversial move, a majority of school trustees voted in 2012 to move an academically rigorous International Baccalaureate program housed at Wawona Middle to Cooper.

The switch came over stiff opposition from some but helped create a seamless channel for central Fresno middle schoolers interested in taking IB classes at Fresno High. The plan was also the missing puzzle piece to connect youngsters attending Dailey Elementary Charter, a central Fresno school with IB classes, to Fresno High's IB program.

But Cooper neighborhood students who didn't qualify for the school's new program were forced to transfer elsewhere. Many went to Fort Miller.

Fresno High area trustee Carol Mills supported the plan at the time. But she says now that support she expected for Fort Miller during the transition, like school resource officers and counselors, never materialized.

"I think it's coming in after the fact," she said.

Mills said she's seen improvements, like moves to find a long-term interim principal and changes to how students are disciplined. But she worries the school is still overcrowded and without stable leadership.

Cooper went its own way, and its new crop of students made [quick gains on state tests](#). Suspension rates dropped to a fraction of what they were before. In November, the school was one of seven to get a \$25,000 check for its improvements.

Meanwhile, Fort Miller students' [state test scores began to drop](#) while the number of suspensions rose.

"It just shows the glaring disparity. You set up a school for success and then you reward that school," said Fresno Teachers Association union President Tish Rice.

Now too much damage has been done, she said.

"There's a culture now where kids understand you can misbehave. You can walk out of class, you can fight with very little consequences," she said. "I don't know why students think that's OK at the school, but there's obviously a message out there that this is acceptable behavior. We're trying to work with the district to change that and put the expectations in place."

Problems boil

Fort Miller tops districtwide lists when it comes to student suspensions and teacher transfer rates. School administrators issued 305 suspensions last semester, preliminary district data shows, 12 more than the entire 2013-14 school year.

Student misbehavior at Fort Miller has ebbed and flowed over the years, state data shows.

Although student suspensions and violent offenses rose after the school boundary changes in 2012 — 293 students were suspended in 2013-14 compared to 208 in 2011-2012 — expulsions shrank from 19 to 11 between those years.

A mass exodus of teachers and instability among school administrators has tangled the problems. District officials say 17 teachers left the school last year, although teachers estimate that number is closer to 22.

Teachers leave for a variety of reasons — retirement, new opportunities or because student enrollment drops — district officials say. Even so, they're working diligently to reverse the trends.

"We react immediately with support," said instructional superintendent Russell. The school hired a new social worker and brought in a probation officer to deal with students in gangs, she said.

Russell said officials are also reviewing safety protocols, including when to call a lockdown.

"We still will look at the situation again as we do in all cases," she said of the January pellet gun episode. "If it happened again, would we make the (same) decision? Maybe not."

Trustee Christopher De La Cerda, who represents Fort Miller, said in an email to The Bee that he's asked Superintendent Michael Hanson to make Fort Miller a priority.

"I'm confident that given the history of the district working to improve schools that are struggling — Webster, Cooper, Yosemite — that we will be able to accomplish the same with (Fort) Miller," he said.

Even so, parents are growing weary of the unrest.

Martinez said she'd considered transferring her daughter to a new school after she was beaten up twice by classmates. She decided otherwise when she found out Unique might end up at a school across town and without access to the district's bus system.

"Why should I have to transfer my daughter? Mine is not the problem," she said.

Parent Diane Matlock said she knows changes won't happen overnight. But she's not willing to wait around, she said. After the pellet gun incident, she decided to take her 14-year-old daughter Olivia out of Fort Miller.

"Me and my husband, we barely made it through high school by the skin of our teeth so we try to instill in our children that it's very important," she said. "I felt like if they can't keep my child safe ... my daughter is not going."

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