P.S. 186 in Harlem Shut; Faulty Fire Alarm Found

By CHARLAYNE HUNTER

After several unsuccessful attempts to activate the fire-alarm system at Public School 186 in Harlem yesterday, an acting deputy chief, Alfred L. Leudesdorff of the Fire Department, ordered classes suspended there.

Because the school has no public-address system, Harold L. Lomax, the principal, walked through the 71-year-old five-story building, at 521 West 145th Street, and used a small bullhorn shortly after 1:30 P.M. to order the evacuation.

About 600 of the school's 1,500 pupils had already been evacuated, on Tuesday, from the upper three floors of the building by members of the National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization (NEGRO). The group, headed by Dr. Thomas W. Matthew, moved into the school on Monday to call attention to what it termed unsafe conditions in the building.

Chief Leudesdorff's move came during a tour of the school set up by Dr. Matthew after he sought action through a visit to the Fire Commissioner's office on Tuesday.

During the inspection tour, which included three other Fire Department officials, the group discovered that the wires leading out of the junction box above the alarm-system panel in the basement had been cut and that the "trouble bell," which signals any fault within the system, was disconnected.

No one on the tour, including the school custodian, James Laque, had any knowledge of how either matter had happened, they said. Shortly before the discovery, Mr. Laque had told the Fire Department officials that he had tested the system at 7:30 that morning and that it had worked.

Mr. Lomax, however, insisted that he and others in the school, as well as the District 6 superintendent, Edwin J. Haas, had "been complaining for months about the extremely erratic system."

"Many of the teachers have complained that they are unable to respond during fire drills due to the fact that they could not hear the gongs," he said.

Allocation Is Dropped

Parents and administrators from District 6 have used the argument that the school is unsafe, with NEGRO officials calling it a fire trap, in an effort to have $6.4-million restored to the capital budget for a replacement school.

Although the allocation was approved in 1967, the item was removed from the capital budget at the end of last year as part of the austerity budget, which prohibits funds for replacement schools.

In addition to the erratic fire-alarm system in the school, among the unsafe conditions, according to Dr. Matthew yesterday, were dead-end corridors more than 50 feet long, storage closets containing flammable materials, skylights with inoperative fire-protection devices, and in some cases no skylights on the top floor.

"Children would suffocate to death before being burned to death or before they got a chance to leap to their death," he said. "In any case, they would die."

Chief Leudesdorff, however, said that except for the faulty alarm system he "didn't see any real hazardous problem."

Dr. Matthew argued, however, that the school was being judged by the standards of what was legal in 1901, when the school was built.

"The Fire Department is talking about legality," Dr. Matthew said. "My great-great-grandfather was a slave and that was legal, but it wasn't right."

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INSPECTING P.S. 186: Alfred L. Leudesdorff, acting deputy chief of division of fire prevention, and Dr. Thomas W. Matthew of National Economic Growth and Reconstruction Organization, touring the Harlem school yesterday before the fire official declared it unsafe.