

Still a stranger in their midst

Students wary of principal

By VIVIAN S. TOY
of The Journal staff

The new principal at St. Francis High School stands in the lobby at the foot of the stairs before school, after school and between classes.

Steve Okoniewski takes this post daily, usually with an expressionless face. Occasionally he lets loose a smile and says, "Good morning."

He stands with his hands in his pockets, towering over most of his students. Okoniewski was a packer during the 1970s and 1975.

Students are hungry for information about him, gathering what snippets they can, mostly from teachers.

The kids pick up a little bit of information from first-hour English teacher Elaine McDermott.

"You'll have to spend time with Mr. Okoniewski now if you're tardy," she says. "And I think he's going to be especially strict about kids who are late for first hour."

Some students are surprised that the principal would take an interest in such matters. Others roll their eyes.

McDermott is a stickler about students being on time for class.

"If you're not in your seat when the bell rings, you get a tardy," she says. "I don't care if you're in the classroom. If you're not where you should be, I'll mark you down as late."

In Family Living class, teacher Nancy Bahling asks her class:

"You're aware of Mr. Okoniewski's policy, aren't you? He's watching for any kids out of

Another in a series of articles about high school life in 1986. Reporter Vivian S. Toy spent three weeks posing as a senior at St. Francis High School.

their seats and not in their classrooms."

Just as she announces this, the principal enters the classroom and asks to see two students.

They troop into the hall.

Their classmates strain to hear the conversation.

Okoniewski enters the classroom with a smile on his face.

"I'm busted," he cackles.

He and his cohort will have to pick up garbage for an hour after school tomorrow, because they skipped second period.

"I told him, 'Okey-dokey!'" he says.

The second boy walks in cursing. "What a — weirdo!"

One senior girl warns her friends not to be late to school. She learned the hard way, she says. She has to spend an hour with the principal because she missed first hour.

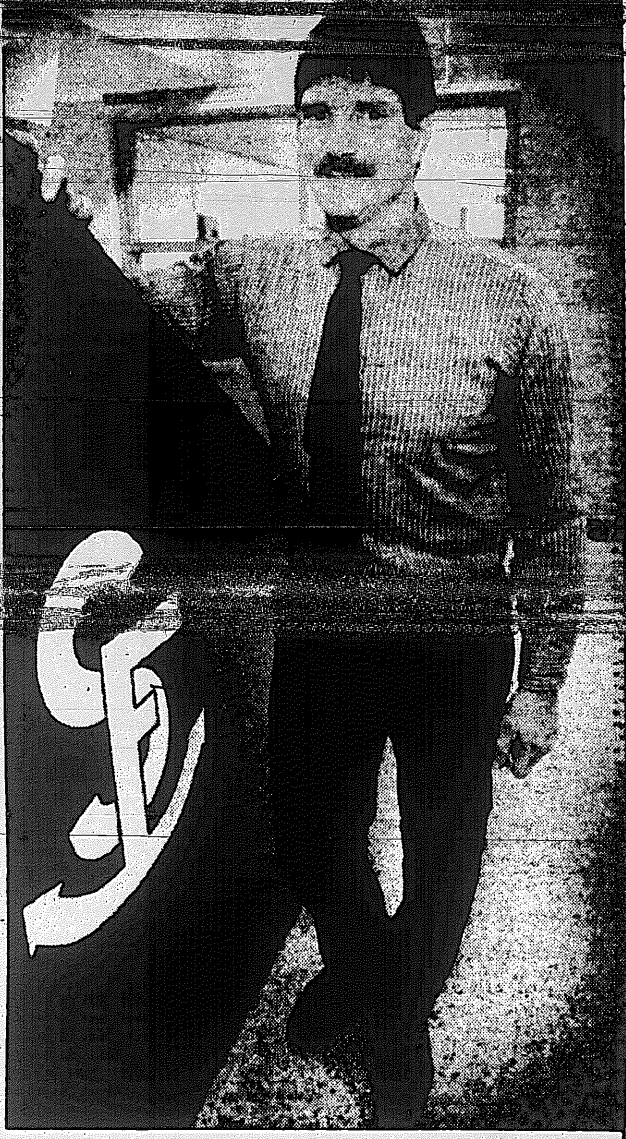
"My mom even called in for me," she exclaims.

Her friends express dismay and glare in the direction of the principal.

"I'd complain," one girl advises.

Okoniewski intends to be more involved in many of the day-to-day workings of the school than his predecessor was. And many of the teachers welcome the new approach.

Please see **Principal**, Page 2B



Journal photos by Jim Gehrz
Steve Okoniewski is in his first year as school principal



Okoniewski has brought stricter rules to the school, including an insistence that students be in class at the bell

Most teens shun drugs at school

But dealers are widely known and do business in the open

By VIVIAN S. TOY
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STEPPING BACK

A dozen students cluster at the back door of St. Francis High School before the school day begins.

As usual, most of the kids are smoking cigarets. But a pipe also is being passed around nonchalantly.

The strong smell of marijuana penetrates the cloud of cigaret smoke that has formed around the students.

Then the first-hour warning bell rings and the group slowly disperses. It is 7:45 a.m.

For most students, it appears that drugs play little, if any, role in school life. But for a few, drugs appear to be a major interest.

In a rare incident during a school day, a boy lights a marijuana pipe in his locker between classes. He looks around carefully to make sure no teachers are nearby, then pokes his head into the locker. He takes a quick drag. Seconds later, he emerges amidst a small cloud of smoke.

Students passing by laugh and look at him with expressions that are mixed with shock and awe. He quietly shuts his locker and saunters to his next class.

A few students indirectly boast, in front of teachers, about their experience with drugs.

For a Family Living course, students are told to select report topics

from a list that ranges from dating to alcoholism to child abuse.

Two boys suggest topics that aren't on the teacher's list: hallucinogenic drugs and cocaine. They chuckle to each other after announcing their topics, obviously pleased with themselves.

The teacher stresses that they must give a balanced account of their subjects.

"Don't just give the glorified aspects, but also some of the negative side effects and aspects."

They both nod and laugh.

The bell rings to end the day. One of the boys marches out of the building, lighting up a joint as soon as he gets out the door.

The few students who sell drugs are known throughout the school.

They're not necessarily discreet, and their conversations often are overheard.

Two boys chat at their lockers.

One asks, "How much are you going to give to him?" The other responds, "One-sixty (\$160). Or I don't know, whatever he asks for. I don't wanna make too much off of him, you know?"

The first boy presumably is asking the second how much of a cut he will give one of the school's major deal-

ers, for whom he has sold drugs.

The school administration is not oblivious to the problem.

"We know we've got the same problems that any other high school has," says Superintendent William Steinert.

It's primarily a question of being in the right place at the right time to catch one of the few students who use and sell drugs.

During the first week of school, school administrators confiscate marijuana from the locker of a senior. He is known as the major drug dealer in the school.

Counselors and school officials think that the boy is dependent on drugs. They are making every effort to get him to seek the professional help he needs to overcome the dependency.

One senior comments, "I think they [the administrators] were on the watch for him, because the kids who are into that — people know who they are. And he deals a lot and real openly, too."

Another student tells about a party where the dealer spent the entire time selling drugs from the upstairs of the host's house.

"People kept going up to see him and it wasn't even his house! He does it real openly."

Tough new principal intrigues students

Principal, from Metro Page

Milton Bretzel expresses his overwhelming approval for the principal's policy on profanity in school.

"Mr. Okoniewski will not tolerate any profanity, and I won't tolerate it in my classroom," Bretzel says. "If I hear anything I shouldn't anywhere in this school, I will pull you aside and the principal will back me on this."

The principal makes his position on profanity clear at a senior class

he calls the meeting brief and quickly runs through the agenda. At the end of the meeting he refers to

the previous week's pep assembly.

"That was very nice, but if I hear a certain cheer that begins with 'bull' again, there won't be any more pep assemblies."

Everyone moans when they hear this ultimatum. Some students scream the stricken word in defiance as they leave the meeting.

One girl asks, "Is he a dictator or what?"

For the most part, the students are courteous when Okoniewski is near, curious when he is not.

Usually speaking to him.

At lunch, one girl informs her

friends that a school employe told her what street Okoniewski lives on, that he's married and has a baby daughter.

Her friends are intrigued. They try to figure out which house he lives in. They are eager for any tidbit of gossip on this stranger who has become a big part of their daily lives.

Next: Life outside the classroom

At least Expensive

HEATING!