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## Reading, Writing and Rap Sheets; Schools Monitoring Students' Off-Campus Conduct:[FINAL Edition]

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By Monday morning, administrators at Fairfax County's James Madison High School already knew that police had raided a party Saturday night at the home of one of their students, Will Royall, and had found what they believed to be drugs in his bedroom.

A teacher warned the 17-year-old that there was an effort underway to have him kicked out of school. "Everything's okay," Royall assured the teacher. "It was off school grounds, don't worry about it."

It would be his last day at Madison that school year. Although Royall had not been charged yet by police in the Oct. 17, 1997, incident, school officials removed him from Madison for the rest of the school year, saying he had committed "serious illegal acts in the community."

His parents, who had known that their son had a drug problem and had enrolled him in a treatment program, were stunned by the school system's decision.

But what happened to Will Royall was no fluke. Determined to make schools safer and root out threats before trouble erupts, a growing number of states -- including Virginia and Maryland -- have passed laws that make it easier for school officials to get juvenile crime information and remove students swiftly for off-campus conduct.

The disappearance of the confidentiality rules that once prevented a principal or a teacher from knowing about a student's problems with the law has touched off a vigorous debate. Critics of the trend say that children are being kicked out of school or labeled troublemakers before they have had their day in court. Proponents argue that by being more informed, school officials can better anticipate problems and help students get counseling. Both Virginia and Maryland require courts or police to notify the local school superintendent when students are arrested for offenses such as assault, burglary and drug and weapons violations, no matter where the alleged crime occurred. Virginia's law also covers cases such as Royall's, in which charges were pending because police had not analyzed the substances found in his room. Both states also allow school boards to remove students for certain off-campus behavior.

The Fairfax school system has given a new name to an expulsion for a crime committed in the community: "exclusion." There were 56 exclusion recommendations in the past school year in Fairfax, up from 47 in 1997-98.

"This is one arena where the well-being of the individual is not of paramount concern but rather the safety and well-being of the general population," said Fairfax school hearing officer Doug Holmes.

"Virginia ought to be proud that we are leading the nation on this issue," said Jerry Kilgore, secretary of public safety under then-Gov. George Allen (R), whose administration started the trend of sharing more juvenile crime information with schools. "It's going to make us better able to offer the programs and treatment that some of these kids need."

Violence in the community often carries over to schools, and school officials -- who are going to be held accountable when it does -- want to know about the first sign of trouble, said Ronald D. Stephens, director of the National School Safety Center.

"School officials are saying, 'Look, we don't want to be blindsided,'" Stephens said. "The {Littleton} Colorado incident has resulted in a tremendous amount of finger-pointing as to who should have known what."

But critics say it is troubling that schools are being told about criminal charges that may later be dismissed or not even make it to court.

"Reporting and acting on the basis of an arrest, rather than a conviction, disturbs me," said Bob Shepherd, a professor of law at the University of Richmond who specializes in juvenile law. "People can be arrested and found not guilty, and how do you reverse what might have taken place -- or the application of a label to a kid that gets firmly embedded? How do you unring a bell?"

Virginia and Maryland are among about a dozen states that have changed their laws in recent years so that more juvenile arrest information can be given to school officials.

In the District, juvenile files remain closed, and school officials cannot expel a student for an alleged crime in the community, said Ralph Neal, assistant D.C. superintendent of senior high schools. If a student has been charged with a serious crime, his school may not be aware of it unless he is incarcerated or a probation officer is checking up on him, Neal said.

Maryland's law requires police to tell school superintendents about student arrests, while in Virginia it is court officials who must report such information. In both states, the superintendent must inform the school's principal, and, in cases where students are removed from school, the school system must provide an alternative educational program.

Virginia lawmakers have gradually expanded the reporting system. The state's law initially required the reporting only of criminal convictions but was changed in 1995 to include arrests. Since then, the legislature has amended the law so that principals are allowed to tell not only teachers but also school personnel involved in "support services."

The issue is not confined to public schools. Concern about underage drinking has prompted administrators at Sidwell Friends School in the District to consider whether its students should face consequences at school for what they do elsewhere.

"There is widespread community discussion about this," said Andrew Berry, principal of the middle school at Sidwell. "We are simply in the discussion phase of developing a policy, if in fact we do develop a policy. It's very complicated."

In Fairfax and other suburban Washington school districts, it is up to the principal to decide whether to seek a student's removal for an alleged crime committed off school property.

John Porter, principal at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, said he weighs each case carefully. A burglary, for example, is serious but may not affect his school in the same way as a firearms violation, he said.

"It does fall back on the principal," Porter said. "You're either going to be right or wrong. It's a very tough call at times."

Fairfax school officials said they could not comment on Royall's case because of privacy rules. But documents provided by Royall's parents give numerous details about the case and the school system's reasons for removing him from Madison.

Police went to the Saturday night party at Royall's home in Vienna after a neighbor called them to report possible drug use and underage drinking at the house. Royall's parents were out of town and had arranged for him to stay with friends, not wanting him to be at home alone. The police said they found marijuana and crystal methamphetamine.

Madison's principal suspended Royall the following Tuesday, then decided on Oct. 22 to remove him from the

school for the rest of his junior year, pending a hearing.

Bill and Patty Royall had not expected the school to react that way. Both parents had a close relationship with Madison. Bill Royall, 50, was the volunteer wrestling coach, and his wife, 52, was on the school's Booster Board and had co-chaired the "safe graduation night" party.

They pointed out to school officials that they were already taking steps to deal with their son's problem. Two weeks before the party raided by police, Bill Royall found a small bag of marijuana in his son's bedroom. The Royalls immediately alerted the school and enrolled their son in a drug treatment program.

"The schools are trying to become parents," Bill Royall said. "They're trying to punish my kid for something he did, not at school and not on school time."

Cutting their son off from his friends and from all school activities, including the wrestling team he was on, would not help their son's recovery, the Royalls argued. Besides, they said, how could he be removed for what the school called "serious illegal acts" when he hadn't even gone to court yet?

In a Nov. 13 letter to the Royalls, written after Will Royall's removal was upheld, school hearing officer Janet L. Cummings acknowledged that their son had "average to above-average grades" and was motivated in school. But Cummings noted the district's "policy of zero tolerance" for drug use and the fact that Will Royall already had been disciplined for possession of drug paraphernalia at school. Cummings said that although Royall maintained he had sold marijuana only once before, a list of names with money owed that police said they had found in his room suggested otherwise. His parents say the list belonged to a friend who was at the party.

Instead of putting their son in a county-run alternative school, the Royalls elected to have him take classes at home from teachers the school system provided.

Four months after Will Royall was removed from Madison, police filed criminal charges, known as a petition, against him. He had his court hearing in April, pleading guilty to a drug possession charge. He was allowed to return to Madison for his senior year and graduated in June. Thomas W. Minnick, director of the Northern Virginia Counseling Group in Falls Church, where Royall was treated, said he has been drug-free for 20 months.

"The way the system is set up, the schools are in a win-win situation," Patty Royall said. "If he came back and he's all right, then it was a good thing. If not, and he messes up, then he deserved it."

Removing students from their school may not always be the best thing for them, said Nancy Ross, executive director of the Virginia Commission on Youth, who worries that the state's requirements for reporting juvenile arrests to schools may have gone too far.

"There are some students who are able to really triangulate their life," Ross said. "They may be involved in criminal activity in the community but don't bring that into school. It may be that school is where they have some successes."

Jane K. Strauss, a Fairfax school board member, said school officials are careful to investigate cases fully before taking any action.

"We must have safe and orderly schools," Strauss said. "At the same time, if we have kids who are in trouble, the sooner we know that, the sooner we can help, or at least do our part. We are not out to get children. When we do exclusions, we must be careful, be fair and not ride roughshod."

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