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School sex incidents not rare, Reeves says

School board chief criticizes Becton

By Ronald J. Hansen
and Gary Scheets
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The president of the D.C. school board said yesterday that sexual incidents similar to one involving nine elementary students last week are common in city schools.

"If the media wanted to go around and look at other schools, they'd see incidents like that going on all the time," Board of Education President Don Reeves said.

Mr. Reeves also criticized schools chief Julius W. Becton Jr. for allowing questions about the

Winston Elementary School matter to linger.

On April 7, five boys and four girls ranging in age from 9 to 12 disrobed and performed sexual acts on one another in a locked room adjacent to a classroom at Winston, at 31st and Erie streets SE.

One boy had "challenged the authority" of teacher Charles Mayo and was sent out of the classroom, administrators said. The boy went into the adjacent "preparation room" and coaxed others to join him.

But parents did not learn about

School shooting injures volunteer

A 23-year-old former student who returned to McKinley High School as a volunteer is wounded in a shooting prompted by a neighborhood basketball dispute. C6

the incident until they read or heard news accounts later in the week.

Gen. Becton said yesterday that he has decided what disciplinary action to take against Mr. Mayo and Winston Principal Ronald Parker but declined to elaborate. Both men have been placed on administrative leave until their cases are resolved, said Loretta Hardge, director of communications for D.C. schools.

Ms. Hardge said that while Mr. Parker is on administrative leave,

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Winston will be run by its assistant principals working with staff from the assistant superintendent for elementary schools.

She said that once disciplinary action has been determined, teachers and administrators have the right to appeal the decision before it takes effect.

Ms. Hardge said she is not aware of any action taken by the school system against any of the nine children involved in the incident.

D.C. police closed their investigation before last weekend after interviews with parents, students and teachers. Police said no charges would be filed against the children, who engaged in oral sex, because no force was involved.

In the District, sexual acts among juveniles are not criminal unless there is a difference of more than four years in the ages of participants.

Some of the girls' parents, however, have said force was used.

"The chief academic officer of the schools should be able to tell the public with a straight face what he's going to do," said Mr. Reeves, adding that both Mr. Parker and Mr. Mayo should have been suspended immediately with pay until an investigation was concluded.

Ms. Hardge said that Gen. Becton agrees there are problems in the schools but that adults need to work together to improve the situation.

"We need to shift our focus as adults and do what's best for the children," she said.

Mr. Reeves said Gen. Becton promised to make security in the schools his top priority. But Gen. Becton has responded by adding metal detectors instead of people to ensure safety, Mr. Reeves said.

Yesterday, police said a senior at McKinley High School shot a 23-year-old man after a day-old argument that started on a neighborhood basketball court.

Police also said yesterday that a 12-year-old boy and a 9-year-old girl were caught "engaged in touching of a sexual nature" on March 20 in a closet at Kenilworth Elementary School.

Sgt. Joe Gentile, a Police Department spokesman, said the department's youth services division is still conducting an investigation of the Kenilworth incidents.

Last year, Winston was the scene of violence when two persons wearing ski masks chased a youth through a side door of the school. One masked attacker fired at their target but missed and fatally shot Damion Blocker, 14, a student at another school who had stopped by to pick up a younger cousin.

Mr. Reeves said Gen. Becton provided the 11-member elected school board with Mr. Mayo's version of the April 7 Winston incident.

According to Mr. Reeves, Mr. Mayo reported seeing a girl lock herself in a room intended for teachers. Later, he said he saw a girl leave the room adjusting her blouse while other children were outside the room, Mr. Reeves said.

Mr. Mayo's explanation did not sufficiently account for 40 minutes, though, Mr. Reeves said.

John Pannel, principal of Malcolm X Elementary School on Alabama Avenue SE, yesterday described Mr. Parker, Winston's principal, as his friend and a conscientious educator.

Mr. Pannel, who said he sent Mr. Parker a card of encouragement yesterday, said the negative attention at Winston reflects badly on all the schools.

"When something happens at one school, of course we're all lumped together," he said. "We're all affected. The parents are discussing this at home. You know the children are listening. They're like little sponges."

Employees at a recreation center behind Winston said Mr. Parker has been a positive influence on the school.

Since arriving in 1995, they said, Mr. Parker has removed graffiti from the exterior walls of the brown brick building and seen to it that outside lights are in constant working order.

• Jim Keary contributed to this article.

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