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Students in sex case won't be punished

By Karyn Spellman
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D.C. school officials don't plan to punish any of nine fourth-graders who performed sexual acts on each other in a locked school room, in part because officials can't determine who is telling the truth.

Usually, a principal or teacher determines punishment for misbehaving schoolchildren if police are not involved, a schools spokeswoman said yesterday.

But because the principal of Winston Educational Center in Southeast and the students' teacher mishandled the April 7 incident, school system officials had to rely on a police investigation to sort it out, she said.

"It's just too muddled," spokeswoman Loretta Hardge said. "This could have been totally different if the adults had been more on target."

Meanwhile, House Speaker Newt Gingrich is pushing forward with his proposal to secure scholarships to private schools for the nine Winston students, his spokeswoman, Christina Martin, said yesterday.

The Georgia Republican first vowed to do so April 13 on a nationally televised news show.

Schools chief Julius W. Becton Jr. announced Friday he had suspended Winston's principal, Ronald Parker, without pay for the rest of the school year because the principal didn't follow proper procedure after learning of the incident involving five boys and four girls, ages 9 to 12.

The fourth-graders' teacher, Charles Mayo, was to learn of similar punishment once the paperwork reaches him. As of yesterday, Mr. Mayo had not been officially notified, Miss Hardge said.

Both Mr. Parker and Mr. Mayo

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initially were placed on administrative leave with pay.

Under formal guidelines, Mr. Parker first should have reported the April 7 incident to police, then the system's central office. Instead, he called all nine children and their parents to the school for a meeting that same day and waited until the next day to call police, officials said.

Miss Hardge said because Mr. Parker mishandled the situation, police investigators and school officials got conflicting accounts and could not determine with confidence exactly what happened in the locked room, which adjoins the fourth-graders' class and is reserved for teachers' use. Nor could they determine how the students ended up there without supervision.

Parents of two of the girls in-

involved asked officials to find an alternative to sending their children back to Winston. Options include home-schooling and a transfer to another public school.

The initial police investigation concluded the sexual acts appeared to be consensual. Under D.C. law, no crime is committed if there is less than four years' difference in the ages of consenting children.

"We are obliged to follow the police investigation," said Miss Hardge in explaining officials' reluctance to punish any of the involved students. "They could not determine that there was violence or criminal acts. So it ties our hands in that respect."

However, Lt. Lorraine Kittrell, assistant commander of the sex offense branch, said last week that police continue to investigate.

While authorities struggled to sort out what happened at Winston, Arlington County police

charged a 9-year-old boy with assault and battery after a female classmate accused him of inappropriately rubbing against her in a lunch line.

The boy was ordered fingerprinted and photographed, a procedure police defended as standard in felony cases. The charge is a felony in Virginia because the girl involved is under age 13.

The girl told school officials the boy rubbed his groin area against her buttocks as she stood in the lunch line March 11 at Glebe Elementary School. The boy said he bumped the girl while reaching for an apple, his attorney said.

Winston, at 31st and Erie streets SE, serves students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Many classrooms are "open," meaning they are not separated by permanent walls and do not have doors.

Mr. Mayo's class is at the end of a series of such open classrooms, near where traditional enclosed classrooms and other rooms line the perimeter of the building.