

Suspensions follow fire at Harrison High Standards

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With the "culprit" for the Wednesday, Jan. 31 fire at Harrison High School indefinitely suspended, Assistant Principal Dennis Noe assures that the safety of building occupants was not jeopardized by opting to keep students inside the facility rather than evacuating it.

Noe Friday explained that the school acted responsibly in the decision to "lock in" students while the small paper fire was extinguished.

The fire was started and quickly extinguished at the bot-

tom of a free-standing stairwell near the auditorium entrance. Noe said there was no chance of smoke to move into areas where students might have been exposed to it.

For example, smoke would have had to zig-zag into and down school hallways to make it to the gym, an unlikely course given the fact the blaze was extinguished so quickly.

According to Noe, the subsequent police investigation determined that arson was not the cause. But the ninth grader responsible for starting it was indefinitely suspended, pending a hearing. Two other students

were also suspended.

Estralee Michaelson, the district's director of Safe and Drug Free Schools, said there are guidelines to follow for fire safety. But whether to evacuate or "lock in" students depends on an assessment of each situation by building administrators.

"And there are variables and levels to a lock in," Michaelson said. "They can keep them in a classroom, ... but they are not actually behind locked doors."

Noe emphasized that the situation was quickly under control, and that there was no need to completely disrupt the high school.

"We had the fire isolated, under control and extinguished," Noe said. "We had the culprit before we did anything (lock in the students)."

Farmington Hills Deputy Fire Chief Pete Baldwin said it is the prerogative of school officials to consider whether it is safer to keep students in a relatively calm, safe environment or have them "move through areas that could be hazardous."

Baldwin emphasized that fire investigators found small combustibles at the bottom of the stairwell. "The premise is, if it (a small fire) is in a stairwell it will pretty much stay there."

President's Commission on Crime - departments such as Farmington have been placed at a disadvantage, noted City Manager Frank Lauhoff in his report to the council.

An associate's degree is the minimum education requirement for other area police departments, including the city of Farmington Hills.

The Farmington Public Safety Department is budgeted for 22 full-time officers, but there currently are only 19 on staff, said Public Safety Director Gary Goss.

If the amendment is adopted, that would also make it easier for the department to recruit

local candidates from nearby Schoolcraft College and the Oakland, Community College-Orchard Ridge campus.

"It opens the door for more recruits and possibly more diversity," noted McShane, adding that the existing ordinance is costing the department a chance to recruit qualified candidates with two years of college.

They now apply elsewhere simply because they can.

"Many qualified applicants are pursuing careers with other departments after they have achieved two years of college or an (associate's) degree," Lauhoff stated in his report. "This situation has been further aggravated by a booming economy, with many law enforcement agencies constantly looking for qualified individuals to recruit."

Learning curve

Goss assured council members that new officers still would be strongly encouraged to continue college and other police-and-fire training programs. (In Farmington, officers are trained to perform the combined duties of police officer and firefighter.)

He added that tuition, for anyone wanting to work toward completing a bachelor's degree, would be paid for by the city.

"This gives them an opportunity to finish their education while working in the field," Goss explained later.

The bachelor's degree standard was adopted by the city

■ 'It opens the door for more recruits...'

JoAnne McShane
—Farmington City Council

council in 1981. But Goss said many of the department's public safety officers hired prior to that year made continuing education a top priority.

Those efforts contributed to the career successes of several people who went on to achieve top positions with several metropolitan police or fire departments.

"I think we used to have a culture on the department of attending college and I think we can return to that," Goss said.

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