

## **School officials defend reduced penalty for administrator's child**

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Metro Schools Director Bill Wise said yesterday that his decision to shorten a student's zero-tolerance expulsion by two months had "absolutely nothing to do" with the fact that the boy's mother works for the school system.

Wise decided two weeks ago to reduce the expulsion of Jameson Jones, a freshman at Hume-Fogg Magnet High School who smoked marijuana across the street from the school one afternoon last October. Instead of returning to Hume-Fogg on Oct. 17, 2001, Jameson will be able to return when the next school year starts Aug. 16.

His mother, Catherine Prentis, is Metro's magnet-school coordinator.

Under the state's zero-tolerance policies governing students' use and possession of drugs and guns, Jameson was expelled for one year. But a law passed last summer gives school directors discretion to review cases individually and modify an expulsion. Jameson is believed to be the first Metro student to ask for an exception to the rule.

"It was the humane thing to do," Wise said, "because if you think about it, to have missed the first two months would have been wasting a (school) year. (The expulsion) would have in effect been two years instead of one."

Asked whether there were any extenuating circumstances in Jameson's case, Wise said there weren't.

"I would give the same consideration to any student charged with the same thing. I don't know that I would modify, but I would certainly consider modifying.

"The fact that it was a staff member's child had absolutely nothing to do with it."

Prentis said in a written statement she was worried about the impact the yearlong suspension would have on her son's academic career.

"Jamie is a good kid who made one mistake and was punished too severely," she wrote.

"If he had been kept in an alternative school for most of his freshman year and also a portion of his sophomore year, then one-half of his high school career would have suffered. With this decision he can return at the beginning of 10th grade and have a much better chance of catching up with his class and being successful."

David Raybin, Jameson's attorney, said he wouldn't be surprised if the other two students who were caught with Jameson in a parking garage behind First Baptist Church on Broadway decided to appeal to Wise now. Raybin does not represent either student.

"We'll be telling parents they have this option, and I imagine parents will take us up on it," school board member Patricia Crotwell said.

Three wrestlers and three cheerleaders at Martin Luther King Magnet School were suspended recently on allegations they smoked marijuana or drank alcohol at the state wrestling tournament in Chattanooga Feb. 15. A hearing will be held soon to decide if the students will be expelled for a year.

Asked whether she worries that some parents might sue the board if their children don't get the same result Prentis' son got, Crotwell said, "I think the system and the director will make every effort to treat people equitably."

Jennifer Bozeman, the board's attorney, stressed that the new state law gives directors discretion to modify expulsions on a case-by-case basis. She said similar circumstances don't always add up to identical situations.

"As far as (whether) this has set in place a course of action the administration has to follow in any case with similar circumstances, I would say no. The whole point of case-by-case review is that you don't want administrators to already have the answer in their mind."

Bozeman and Crotwell said Wise and the school system would have been criticized no matter what they did.

"It would have been equally unfair to the child for Dr. Wise not to be able to modify the expulsion based on who his mother is," Bozeman said.

"They've been treated just like any other family," board member Kathleen Harkey said. "Our system is very strict and consistent, and everything was documented."

Raybin said he thought Prentis' position, if anything, "was a problem, because the school system did not want to give the perception that it gave special treatment."