**Facebook photos sting Minn. high school students**

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**WIRE REPORT**

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EDEN PRAIRIE, Minn. — For 16-year-old Nick Laurent, walking out of Eden Prairie High School yesterday to protest the school's punishment of students seen partying on Facebook pages was about asking administrators to be fair.

More than a dozen students joined Laurent after learning of the walkout from fliers the junior handed out the day before. The students said school administrators overreacted to the perception that students in the photos were drinking.

“It's the loudest thing we could do,” said Laurent, who organized the walkout but said he wasn't one of the students in the photos.

Laurent tried to make his point by passing out red plastic cups that were similar to those seen in some of the photos. He noted that it was impossible to see what was inside the cups, so administrators couldn't prove that students were drinking.

Laurent agreed that athletes and other students who sign a code of conduct to be involved in activities should face consequences if they break the rule against drinking alcohol. But he said the punishments were too harsh.

“They don't have (the) support of the students to hand out arbitrary punishments and punishments that don't fit the crime,” he said.

Once the photos on the social-networking Web site came to the attention of administrators, 42 students were interviewed and 13 face some discipline over the pictures, school officials said.

School officials haven't said how the students were disciplined, but Minnesota State High School League penalties start with a two-game suspension for the first violation. Laurent and other students said they knew of classmates who were banned from their sports teams for five weeks.

Principal Conn McCartan did not return a call seeking comment on the walkout, but students said they expected they'd be punished.

In earlier statements, the school's principal said school officials did not seek out the pictures. But he didn't say who gave the school the photos.

“We do not go out looking at student social networking sites. We do however take action when we are given legitimate information about school or Minnesota State High School League violations,” McCartan said in an e-mail to families of his students.

McCartan said interviews with students suggested, however, that the pictures might have been posted on such sites, and warned of the dangers.

“These sites are not private places,” he wrote. “Their content forms a permanent and public record of conversations and pictures.”

In an e-mail to parents and guardians, Superintendent Melissa Krull said, “We are not legally at liberty to discuss further details of this investigation.”

Fourteen-year-old Ali Saley said cutting class for the cause was worth it. She held signs such as, “They walk or we do,” in solidarity with the students who were punished. A few cars honked in support of the students as they gathered on a footbridge over the road in front of the school.

The Eden Prairie High School students who got into trouble ran afoul of a new reality: digital cameras and social networking sites make the entire world a public space.

It's becoming increasingly common for schools and potential employers to check social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and to penalize kids or other people for what they find, said William McGeveran, a professor at the University of Minnesota Law School and an expert on data privacy.

“Facebook is largely a public space. Users don't always perceive it that way, but that's what it is,” McGeveran said.

Even when young people are cautious about what they put on the pages, he said, friends or acquaintances can post pictures of them in questionable situations without their knowing about it.

McGeveran cited [research by the Pew Internet & American Life Project](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP%E2%80%94Teens%E2%80%94Social%E2%80%94Media%E2%80%94Final.pdf) that suggested most teens were aware of the risks of posting personal information on the Internet. A report issued last month found that most teens restrict access to their posted photos and videos at least some of the time, and that few consistently share them without any restrictions.

“But some students are still foolish about what they put on their pages,” he said.

Eden Prairie High School has about 3,300 students, and Facebook lists about 2,800 members in its network for the school, including more than 500 from the current senior class. A spot check on Jan. 9 showed that some had posted dozens and even hundreds of pictures of themselves and their friends. However, most members used a privacy setting to limit access to their profiles to friends and other authorized people.

Schools in Minnesota have limited ability to regulate the conduct of students after hours. When students participate in sports or certain fine-arts activities, however, they must agree in writing to abide by the long-standing rules of the Minnesota State High School League, which prohibit the use of alcohol, tobacco and controlled substances, even over the summer.

League spokesman Howard Voigt noted that parents must sign the forms, too, certifying that they understand the rules and penalties. Still, he said, complaints are common.

“We run into that all the time here — parents call and accuse us of being too hard on their kid,” he said.

Voigt said there had been several cases of students' running afoul of league rules because of potential violations posted on social-networking sites.

It's not safe for kids to assume what they do in small groups won't be broadcast to the entire world, McGeveran said.

“I don't think most of us would have liked to have lived our teen years in an era of ubiquitous camera phones and social networking,” he said. “It really changes the perception of what places are private and which ones aren't.”