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Parents to school board: Keep weapons violators out

SUSAN HARRIS

They just don't want him back at Perquimans County High School.

That was the message seven speakers, each with a child or grandchild at Perquimans County High School — and all but one the family member of a victim of an alleged attempted armed robbery on campus — told school board members Monday night.

The rumor that spread late last week that the 15-year-old alleged gunman might be allowed back in school after only a 10-day suspension brought about 100 people to the regular school board meeting Monday. The meeting was moved to Hertford Grammar School to accommodate the crowd expected.

Parents expressed both fear and anger that the board would consider allowing back on campus the alleged gunman, who is accused of having attempted to rob four students in front of the high school between the end of the regular school day and a soccer match scheduled for 5 p.m. on Sept. 12.

Sheriff Eric Tilley confirmed that juvenile petitions have been filed against the student in conjunction with the incident. The student's name can not be released because he is under 16.

In addition, Hertford Police Chief Dale Vanscoy said the same juvenile faces similar charges resulting from an investigation by his department into alleged armed extortion that occurred at Missing Mill Park just two days earlier. Juvenile petitions have also been filed in that case.

At the end of its meeting, the board adjourned into closed session. With the benefit of legal counsel, the board made a unanimous decision regarding reducing the 365-day suspension, according to schools Public Information Officer Brenda Lassiter. The decision will be directly relayed to the student's parent.

Robin Ward-Dassler, a math teacher at the high school and the parent of one of the four victims, told board members the possibility that the student might be allowed back in school made her question her desire to continue to teach in Perquimans. The National Board Certified teacher has taught in Perquimans for 22 years, she said.

Ward-Dassler said the board should honor the 365-day suspension imposed by PCHS Principal Melvin Hawkins and Superintendent Dr. Kenneth Wells in accordance with state law, and even asked the board to take a step further and expel the student. She said having a gun on campus

and using a gun to attempt to extort money from four other students justifies expulsion over suspension.

Ward-Dassler said that overturning the long-term suspension would undermine the authority of both the principal and superintendent, and would likely cause other students suspended on weapons violations to request that their suspension be lifted, resulting in a very unsafe environment for students and staff.

Lastly, Ward-Dassler called for the resignation of the board members on the appeal hearing committee that were rumored to have decided to allow the student back in school.

Other speakers echoed Ward-Dassler's comments, questioning the board's rumored decision in light of a zero tolerance for weapons policy.

According to several people close to the school case who spoke on the condition of anonymity, the perpetrator approached four students in front of the school prior to a soccer game on Sept. 12. He told the male students to give him their money. They refused.

The would-be robber patting the area around his waist as he spoke, and when the four students continued to refuse to give the gunman money, he allegedly pulled up his shirt and showed what the four described as the butt of a hand gun. Although the student victims later admitted that they were frightened, they walked away.

The boys were afraid to tell what had happened, and school officials did not know until the next day when a friend of one of the victims reported it.

Sources said the boys were called in Hawkins individually and questioned about the incident, and all gave the same account of the events.

That story included the fact that there was another male with the alleged gunman, but none knew his name. The boys were asked independently to look in a yearbook to see if they could identify the person with the gunman. All chose the same person from the yearbook.

The sixth person on the scene, described as a friend of the alleged gunman, was questioned and he told the same story the four victims had told earlier. The sources did not know if the person with the alleged gunman was an accomplice or just happened to be with his friend at the time of the alleged incident.

At that point, the student was suspended for 10 days by Hawkins. In compliance with school board policy and state law, Hawkins completed his investigation

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FIERY CRASH



Bus wreck claims 4 lives

Bus driver, volunteers credited with saving 40 students

SUSAN HARRIS

It was like a scene out of a horror movie.

Metal twisted beyond recognition. A charred school bus with all its windows broken out. Debris scattered over the roadway. Children screaming.

And worst of all, body bags filled with the remains of the four men who lost their lives while on the way to work Monday morning.

But it was also like a scene from a movie based

on the biblical commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

For on Ocean Highway South, in the midst of an incident that brought the largest single loss of life in many years to the county, there were many heroes who stepped up to save the lives of 40 children and a bus driver trapped inside a burning school bus.

Schools Superintendent Dr. Kenneth Wells spoke quietly during Monday night's board meeting, as he updated the board and about 100 people gathered for the meeting at Hertford Grammar School, on the incident.

Wells spoke of his pride in the community — motorists, folks in neighboring homes, emergency personnel, parents, the bus driver, the students — who each responded in extraordinary ways to help passen-



PHOTOS COURTESY PERQUIMANS COUNTY SCHOOLS

Four people died Monday morning when a work truck rear-ended a Perquimans County Schools bus Monday morning. All 40 students and the driver were able to get off the burning bus without serious injury.

gers on the bus and in the truck.

Especially high on Wells' list of those who deserved praise was bus driver Zita Privott Ferebee, 30, a four-year driver who refused to exit the bus until she had made sure — at risk to her own safety — that all her young charges were off the bus and out of harm's way.

Even North Carolina Highway Patrol Trooper Ernest D. Goodwin Jr., one of many law enforcement officers on the scene, was

complimentary of Ferebee. "That bus driver did a terrific job getting those kids off that bus," Goodwin said.

Ferebee was also credited with handling her driving duties admirably after looking behind her to see a black vehicle bearing down. That she was able to keep the bus from overturning may have saved serious injury, even lives, according to school and law enforcement officials.

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Horse remain critical after abuse, recent rescue

MARGARET FISHER

Two horses left in a pen without food remain in fairly critical condition after they were rescued two weeks ago.

A third horse died four hours after rescuers arrived to the scene on Snug Harbor Road in the Bethel community. The other two were taken to Powellville Pet Clinic in Bertie County where they were tested and treated. Blood samples were also taken from the horse that died.

On a scale up to 10 with normal body fat for a horse being about five and a half to six, these horses graded one or less, said Veterinarian Cheryl Powell.

As of Saturday, the horses were beginning to look

like they were filling out, but it could take up to six months before they may be cleared from having fur-

ther complications, including death, Powell said.

"Even though they look better and are happier,"

she said, "they are not out of the woods."

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PHOTO BY MARGARET FISHER

Sundance (white) and Ahren are beginning to put on weight and appear happier now that they have been rescued after having been without food for a length of time. Rescuer Sherry Davenport has provided a foster home for the horses in Currituck County while charges of abuse await trial. Megan Wise, 15, helps take care of the horses.

WEEKEND WEATHER

THURSDAY
HIGH: 63, LOW: 45
SUNNY

FRIDAY
HIGH: 63, LOW: 59
MOSTLY CLOUDY

SATURDAY
HIGH: 61, LOW: 48
SHOWERS