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Students Suspended Over Route Home *Principal Had Barred Use of 2 Streets*

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At least a dozen Francis Junior High School students were suspended for three days this week for taking a prohibited route home, an action being protested by an attorney representing one of the pupils.

The school's principal, who established the rule forbidding students to walk along N and O streets between 24th Street NW and Dupont Circle, said he is only trying to protect the youths and cooperate with neighbors. The lawyer is calling it a violation of the students' constitutional rights.

"There's no way this can be lawful, no way," said Douglas R. Sparks, who contacted Francis Principal Courtney L. Fletcher on behalf of eighth-grader Ernest Flores, 15. "To suspend somebody for three days and have a negative thing on their academic records because they walked on a public sidewalk... All I'm asking is, what's your legal authority for this?"

But Fletcher is standing firm, and a top D.C. school official is backing the principal, although he did ask Fletcher to reduce the suspension to two days.

"We have jurisdiction of our students from the time they leave home in the morning to the time they return home in the evening," said Ralph Neal, assistant superintendent for student services. "The attorney is off course."

Neal said Sparks can appeal Ernest's suspension to the superintendent to try to get it erased from the student's academic file. But Sparks said he wants Ernest reinstated immediately.

The students were suspended effective yesterday after being caught Monday afternoon walking east along N Street toward Dupont Circle, where many of them were to catch public transportation, Ernest said.

"A police officer caught us half-way down N Street and told us to about-face and to go back to the school so we could see the principal," he said.

In the auditorium, Fletcher told the students, who Ernest said numbered about 20 or 30, that they had been warned about taking the prohibited route and would be suspended for three days.

Fletcher would describe the number of suspended students only as "a dozen or more," but he said he suspended four other students last week for one day, also for walking along N Street after school.

Neither Fletcher nor the police officer has alleged that any of the students suspended was participating in any other wrongdoing. But Fletcher said it was previous incidents of vandalism against private property, harassment of pets and excessive rowdiness that prompted him to establish his rule two or three years ago. Students are told, during daily announcements, to walk north from the school to P Street and east along P to Dupont Circle.

The principal, school resource police officers and other school personnel monitor the students as they walk along P Street "to help direct them to the bus and Metro stops," Fletcher said. "We want to make sure we don't get blamed for things."

Ernest enrolled at Francis Junior High on March 22, after leaving another District middle school because he was harassed by gang members. Being new to the school, he said, he did not even realize he was on N Street on Monday until the police officer stopped the students and sent them to the principal.

"I think it's not fair because for me, for example, that's my shortest way to get home and my mom likes me to be home early," Ernest said. "She doesn't like me to be in the streets for a long time... We weren't doing anything bad. We were just walking."

Staff writer Justin Blum contributed to this report.