

COURTNEY JOHNSON,

Appellant

v.

CARROLL COUNTY
BOARD OF EDUCATION,

Appellee

BEFORE THE

MARYLAND

STATE BOARD

OF EDUCATION

Opinion No. 99-44

OPINION

In this appeal, a junior at Westminster High School and her parents contest the decision prohibiting Courtney from participating in extracurricular activities from February 11, 1999 until April 20, 1999 based on a violation of the school system's extracurricular activity conduct eligibility policy.¹ Appellants argue that the local board's decision is arbitrary, unreasonable and illegal. The local board has filed a Motion for Summary Affirmance, maintaining that its decision should be upheld. Appellants have filed an opposition to the motion.

BACKGROUND

On February 6, 1999, Courtney² attended an un-chaperoned party at the home³ of another Westminster High School student where minors were illegally consuming alcohol. After conducting an extensive investigation, the principal's designee charged Courtney with constructive possession of alcohol in violation of the school system's extracurricular activity conduct eligibility policy, and deemed her ineligible for participation in extracurricular activities for 45 days.⁴

¹*William Arnold v. Carroll County Board of Education* and *Jody Mark Farver v. Carroll County Board of Education* arise out of the same incident.

²At the time of the incident, Courtney was the class historian to the class of 2000, the National Art Honor Society, and the student senate. She had also participated on the varsity volleyball team that year.

³The house in which this party took place is of extremely grand size, with many rooms and levels, a large front and back yard, and a long circular driveway.

⁴Approximately 50 students in total were disciplined as a result of the party. Only nine of those students were charged with consumption of alcohol. Courtney was not charged with consumption of alcohol. Forty-one including Courtney were charged with constructive possession. Twenty students appealed to the superintendent, four of whom were successful in their appeals and were reinstated. Courtney assisted school administrators by naming three

Courtney claims that she arrived at the party with some friends at approximately 10:30 p.m. and saw no alcohol or evidence that alcohol was present at the party. She further claims that at approximately 11:00, she went to the lower level of the home for the first time, at which point she noticed the presence of alcohol and decided to leave. She indicates that she then gathered the people with whom she arrived and that she was off of the premises by 11:15 p.m. (Tr. 8-16).

The Westminster High School Student/Parent Handbook section on conduct eligibility for extracurricular activities (p.38 - 41) states:

- a. The county-wide disciplinary regulations for all students as outlined in the Pupil Services Handbook and this Student-Parent Handbook will be enforced.⁵
- b. Students may not use, be in actual or constructive possession of, manufacture, or distribute any controlled dangerous substance, drug paraphernalia, controlled paraphernalia, look-alike drugs, or alcohol, the possession, use, transfer, or sale of which is prohibited by law, at any time, on or off school premises.

individuals at the party who were intoxicated and one individual who consumed alcohol.

⁵The drug and alcohol disciplinary policy states (Student/Parent Handbook p. 18):

The Board of Education of Carroll County strongly . . . endorses aggressive disciplinary action for the use, possession, constructive possession, manufacture, or distribution of controlled dangerous substances, controlled paraphernalia, . . . and alcohol by students. . . Students in violation of drug/alcohol policies, at anytime, on or off school premises, will be declared ineligible for extracurricular activities. . . .

It further states (p.20) that:

Strong deterrents are necessary in an effort to give students additional reasons not to use alcohol or drugs. Therefore, it is the policy of the Board of Education to consider any student ineligible for participation in extracurricular activities if the student uses, possesses, manufactures, or distributes controlled dangerous substances, controlled paraphernalia, look-alike drugs, or alcohol, at any time, on or off school premises.

The school administration interprets the conduct eligibility policy as requiring students to remove themselves from circumstances in which they are knowingly in proximity to minors illegally consuming alcohol, at any time on or off school premises. Students who violate the policy are deemed ineligible to participate in any extracurricular activity for the remainder of the season or forty-five (45) school days, whichever is longer.

Appellants appealed the ineligibility determination, and on March 3, 1999, attended a conference conducted by the superintendent's designee.⁶ By letter dated March 12, 1999, the superintendent's designee advised Appellants that the superintendent was upholding the decision. That letter states in part the following:

In reaching our decision related to your appeal, we reviewed the history of the policy and its implementation, the notes taken by school administrators during their questioning of students, the letters of appeal and the information gathered during the appeal hearing. In Courtney's case we are upholding the decision of the Westminster High School administration for the following reasons:

- by the time of Courtney's arrival there were alcoholic beverage containers visible on the property, students were drinking throughout the house and on the surrounding grounds;
- Courtney admitted she saw alcohol consumed and those under the influence of alcohol;
- Courtney's departure time aligns with student's reports that someone went through the house yelling "cops";
- 45 minutes was more than enough time for Courtney to recognize the party was an inappropriate place for her to be, collect her friends and leave;
- the Eligibility for Extra-Curricular Activities Policy was noted, distributed and reviewed in numerous occasions; and
- even if the volleyball coach conveyed inaccurate information

⁶Simultaneously Appellants and other aggrieved students and parents unsuccessfully sought a temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction in the United States District Court for the District of Maryland, *Farver v. Board of Education of Carroll County*, 40 F. Supp. 2d 323 (D. Md. 1999), and in the Circuit Court for Carroll County, *Farver v. Board of Education of Carroll County*, Case No. C-99-29126 (Mar. 22, 1999).

that warning applied on February 6.

Appellants appealed the superintendent's decision to the local board. A full evidentiary hearing was held where Appellants were represented by counsel.⁷ In a decision issued on April 14, 1999, the local board upheld the ineligibility determination. The local board found that

- Courtney was sufficiently aware of the conduct eligibility rule and understood she could not place herself in proximity with underage persons possessing or consuming alcohol;
- although Courtney did not see alcohol until approximately 11:00, she acknowledged on cross examination that she had seen a number of Westminster High School students drinking alcohol (emphasis added);
- information gathered by school officials reasonably established that a large number of students were involved in alcohol consumption around 10:30 p.m. as witnessed by Westminster High School students present at the time;
- ample evidence showed that by 10:30 p.m., underage drinking was occurring in different sections of the house so that it was unlikely that Courtney did not see drinking until 11:00 p.m.;
- student statements revealed that illegal consumption of alcohol was occurring both inside and outside the house in the 9:30-10:30 p.m. time frame;
- Courtney decided to leave around the time that someone had run through the house yelling "cops" causing many students to leave the party out of fear of being caught (emphasis added);
- Courtney was present at the party for a period of time when underage drinking of alcohol occurred and she did not remove herself in a reasonably prompt time from that environment;
- the testimony of students at the party, even statements comprising hearsay, has a high degree of reliability because they were statements against interest which were corroborated;

⁷Counsel for the Appellants is the same attorney who represented all of the students involved in the proceedings in the United States District Court.

- the conduct eligibility rule is a proper exercise of the local board’s authority to enact rules to manage its public school system; and
- the conduct eligibility rule encourages student leaders and athletes to set a high standard for other students to follow while also serving as a deterrent.

ANALYSIS

Mootness

As a preliminary matter, the local board contends that this appeal should be dismissed as moot. It is well established that a question is moot when “there is no longer an existing controversy between the parties, so that there is no longer any effective remedy which the courts [or agency] can provide.” *In Re Michael B.*, 345 Md. 232, 234 (1997); *See also Walter Chappas v. Montgomery County Board of Education*, MSBE Opinion No. 98-16 (March 25, 1998). Although the ineligibility penalty has lapsed, Appellants’ request that Courtney’s school records containing reference to the extracurricular activities disqualification be expunged. However, the principal of Westminster High School has filed an affidavit stating that Westminster High does not place documentation of a loss of extracurricular eligibility in a student’s educational records and that Courtney’s records do not reflect the ineligibility determination. Therefore, we find that this appeal is moot because there has been no impact on Courtney’s records and there is no remedy to provide.

Legality of Policy Regulating Off-School Conduct

Nonetheless, if we were to review the merits of the appeal we would uphold the local board decision for the following reasons. It is well established that the standard of review for a controversy over a decision of a local board involving a local policy is that the decision of the local board shall be considered prima facie correct, and the State Board may not substitute its judgment for that of the local board unless the decision is arbitrary, unreasonable, or illegal. COMAR 13A.01.01.03E(1).

In *Sara Johnson v. Baltimore County Board of Education*, MSBE Op. 96-29 (September 25, 1996), the State Board explained its role in reviewing school disciplinary policies:

We do not believe it is appropriate for the State Board to determine the specific punishment for a student’s misconduct. Rather, our role is to determine whether the disciplinary code established by a local school system is rationally based, publicized to the student body, and fairly and consistently applied.

Additionally, in *John Schlamp v. Board of Education of Howard County*, MSBE Opinion No. 95-11 (May 13, 1995), the State Board enumerated the principles that must be applied to determine the validity of school regulation of off campus conduct: whether the conduct being regulated has a direct effect on the order and general welfare of the school and whether the regulation is reasonable in scope.

Applying the criteria enunciated above, we find that the conduct being regulated is rationally based and has a direct effect on the order and general welfare of the school. Courts of other jurisdictions have recognized rules regulating out of school conduct as reasonable and rationally related to legitimate interests. See *Bush v. Dassel-Cokato Board of Education*, 745 F. Supp. 562, 571-572 (D. Minn. 1990); *Felton v. Fayette School District*, 875 F.2d 191, 193 (8th Cir. 1989); *Braesch v. DePasquale*, 265 N.W.2d 842, 846 (1978), cert. denied, 439 U.S. 1068 (1979); *Bunger v. Iowa High School Athletic Association*, 197 N.W.2d 555, 563-564 (1972). This Board has also upheld school disciplinary/eligibility policies encompassing behavior off school property at a private event. See *Kevin Pickett v. Board of Education of Montgomery County*, MSBE Op. 98-45 (August 26, 1998). Moreover the Circuit Court for Carroll County has previously held the school system's conduct eligibility policy to be "directly related to an issue of great concern, both to the schools and to the community at large." See *Kaltenbacher v. Carroll County Board of Education*, Case No. CV0337 (1984) (denying injunction to prevent imposition of penalty on students deemed in violation of conduct eligibility policy. "Constructive possession" was not included in the policy at that time).

Bush v. Dassel-Cokato Board of Education, the opinion of the U.S. District Court in Minnesota, is particularly instructive in this instance because of the similarity of the school policy at issue in that case to the policy at Westminster. In *Bush*, a student was declared ineligible for extracurricular activities because of her attendance for approximately fifteen minutes at a party where alcohol was served to minors. The school policy prohibited attendance at parties where alcohol and/or illegal drugs were present. *Id* at 564. The *Bush* court upheld the policy and the application of the policy to the behavior of the student, stating that the "[d]isciplining of a student for attending a party at which alcohol is consumed by minors is a reasonable means of deterring alcohol consumption among students, a goal which is not only legitimate, but highly compelling. *Id* at 572.

In addressing the nexus between student behavior off school grounds and the effect of that behavior on the school environment, the *Bush* court had no difficulty concluding that "illegal consumption of alcohol 'has a direct effect on the welfare of the school,'" and that "school regulations aimed at curbing alcohol consumption among students fall within the authority of the school board, even if the activity regulated occurs off school grounds." *Bush*, 745 F. Supp. at 573. In so holding, the court quoted *Schail by Kross v. Tippecanoe County School Corp.*, 864 F.2d 1309, 1324 (7th Cir.) (sustaining a high school's random urinalysis program):

[I]f students are to be educated at all, an environment conducive to learning must be maintained. The plague of illicit drug use which

currently threatens our nation's schools adds a major dimension to the difficulty the schools face in fulfilling their purpose – the education of our children. If the schools are to survive and prosper, school administrators must have reasonable means at their disposal to deter conduct which substantially disrupts the school environment.

In the present case, the local board's policy and the mandated punishment were implemented to deter alcohol use among its students, particularly those who represent the school in extracurricular activities and athletics and thereby serve as examples to others. William H. Hyde, Superintendent of Carroll County Public Schools, testified to the urgency in addressing underage alcohol use within the school community. *See* Testimony of Hyde, Supt. 6, Tr. 4-10. The illegal use of alcohol and drugs by young people in Carroll County is a serious problem. *See* 1996 Maryland Adolescent Survey (indicating that 53.7% of 12th graders surveyed in Carroll County public schools had consumed beer and/or wine coolers within the month prior to the survey, and that 38.1% surveyed had consumed liquor). The policy promotes student health and safety; promotes students involved in extracurricular activities as positive peer models and representatives of the schools; and provides students who participate in extracurricular activities with strong incentives and acceptable reasons not to succumb to peer pressure to use alcohol or drugs, or to attend parties where such substances are illegally served and consumed by minors. *See* Westminster High Student/Parent Handbook (p. 18, 20, 40) and Pupil Services Handbook (p. 67-67a). For all of these reasons, we find the school board policy rationally related to legitimate school interests.

We also find that the school board is authorized to prescribe such rules. Section 4-108 of the Education Article, Annotated Code of Maryland, mandates that local boards of education “[a]dopt, codify, and make available to the public bylaws, rules, and regulations not inconsistent with State law, for the conduct and management of the county public schools.” (1997 Repl. Vol.). As explained above, the policy at issue is reasonably related to and has a direct effect on the welfare of the school.

Interpretation of Constructive Possession

As noted above, the conduct eligibility policy prohibits among other things actual or constructive possession of alcohol at any time on or off school premises. While the conduct eligibility policy does not define constructive possession, the policy must be read in light of the other disciplinary policies referenced therein and interpreted in a manner consistent with those policies. The drug and alcohol policy defines possessor as follows:

a student who has alcohol, drugs, or paraphernalia as defined in Section V A on his/her personal property or who has such substance under his/her control or who has knowingly placed himself/herself in proximity with a person known to have alcohol or

drugs on his/her personal property or under his/her control on school property, at school-sponsored or related functions, and on school buses/coaches. (Emphasis added).

When viewing these policies together, we find that constructive possession reasonably includes attendance at a party where underage alcohol possession and consumption occur.

If there appears to be some ambiguity in the language of the conduct eligibility policy, any significant ambiguity was clarified by the principal's designee, John Seaman, who orally publicized the school's interpretation of the policy to the entire student body at the annual back to school assembly. Mr. Seaman testified that he annually addresses the conduct eligibility policy during the assembly, and advises students that they will be ineligible for participation in extracurricular activities if they are present at a party where alcohol is being consumed by minors. (Tr. 31).

Additionally, Courtney participated on the volleyball team whose members were advised on the conduct eligibility policy. Mr. Seaman testified that sports teams are given a "team talk" by one of the assistant principals at the school between the time the team is formed and the first contest. At the "team talk" the assistant principal delivers the same information on the conduct eligibility policy that is relayed at the annual back to school assembly. (Tr. 32). Courtney and her parents also signed the athletic participation form indicating that they had read the provisions of the Guide for Student Athletes and Parents, and that they understood the eligibility standards. In light of these facts, we find that the policy was reasonably explained and publicized to Courtney.⁸

Nonetheless, while the goals of the policy are commendable, the policy as currently worded may be difficult to apply in certain situations. For example, it can be extremely difficult to prove that a student has actual knowledge that an underage individual is consuming alcohol, and that the student has not removed himself from the situation in a timely fashion. Additionally, although not the case here, it is possible that the conduct eligibility policy could encompass violations that were not intended. For example, a student might be seated on a train or airplane or at a concert or sporting event near an underage person consuming alcohol; or the student might be at a wedding where he is seated near a minor drinking alcohol while partaking in the champagne toast. Under a literal reading of the policy these would all amount to violations if the student did not remove himself immediately from the situation. We can also conceive of a situation where a student's attempt to comply with the policy may place the student's safety in peril. For example, a female student attempting to remove herself from proximity to underage drinking occurring at a party on the grounds outside the home may put herself in a precarious position by waiting on a dark street late at night. In light of these concerns, we strongly recommend that the conduct eligibility policy be revised in order to avoid these pitfalls and to explicitly define the meaning of constructive possession.

⁸The conduct eligibility policy also appears to have been consistently applied. All students that were present at the party for other than a few minutes were found to be in constructive possession of alcohol in violation of the conduct eligibility policy.

Application of Conduct Eligibility Policy

With regard to the application of the conduct eligibility policy to the facts of this case, we note that participation in extracurricular activities is a privilege and not a right. There is therefore no Fourteenth Amendment due process violation; however the board's application of the policy is subject to review under the arbitrary, unreasonable or illegal standing set out at COMAR 13A.01.01.03 E(1). Here, we believe that a reasoning mind could have reasonably reached the same conclusion as the local board. As the record reflects, the local board considered the entire record in making its decision to uphold the exclusion of Courtney from extracurricular activities. Part of the board's deliberative process, as trier of fact, includes making credibility decisions concerning the witnesses and their testimony, as well as determining the weight to be accorded hearsay testimony.⁹ See, e.g., *Board of Trustees v. Novik*, 87 Md. App. 308, 312 (1991), *aff'd*, 326 Md. 450 (1992) ("It is within the Examiner's province to resolve conflicting evidence. Where conflicting inferences can be drawn from the same evidence, it is for the Examiner to draw the inferences."); *Board of Education v. Paynter*, 303 Md. 22, 36 (1985)(same). The State Board may not substitute its judgment for that of the local board unless there is independent evidence in the record to support the reversal of a credibility decision. See *Dept. of Health & Mental Hygiene v. Anderson*, 100 Md. App. 283, 302-303 (1994); *Kaleisha Scheper v. Baltimore County Board of Education*, MSBE Opinion No. 98-23 (April 29, 1998); *Corey Williamson v. Board of Education of Anne Arundel County*, MSBE Opinion No. 97-20 (April 30, 1997); *Mecca Warren v. Board of Education of Baltimore County*, MSBE Opinion No. 96-16 (April 29, 1996).

In this case, Courtney admittedly attended a party where she observed underage alcohol consumption. However, she claims that she left immediately upon discovering that underage alcohol consumption was taking place. The record also contains the testimony of the principal's designee concerning the investigation of the incident conducted at the school level, including the questioning of approximately 58 students. Based on the investigation, the principal's designee evaluated the events of the evening, taking credibility into account, and made necessary conclusions concerning the sequence of events and what had transpired at the party, such as the number of people in attendance, their times of attendance, and the amount of alcohol present and consumed. (Tr. 30-31).

The record also contains the testimony of the superintendent's designee, who conducted her own investigation and considered the totality of the information that she had gathered. (Tr. 34-40). She noted that around the 10:30 time frame, other students had indicated that the party was so out of hand that they were choosing to leave, thus making it difficult to believe that Courtney had not witnessed any underage alcohol possession or consumption until just prior to

⁹The proceedings in this case were not held in a court of law. Rather, the proceedings consisted of a hearing before an administrative body which was not bound by the strict rules of evidence and in which hearsay evidence was admissible. See, e.g., *Travers v. Baltimore Police Dep't*, 115 Md. App. 395, 408 (1996); *Kade v. Charles H. Hickey Sch.*, 80 Md. App. 721, 725 (1989); *Eichberg v. Maryland Bd. of Pharm.*, 50 Md. App. 189, 192-193 (1981).

the time she decided to leave. (Tr. 40). Information gathered during her investigation revealed that Courtney was part of a group that decided to leave the house at 11:15 when someone ran through the house yelling that the cops were there. (Tr. 35).

Finally, we note that this Board has upheld the denial of a student's privilege to participate in school sponsored extracurricular activities due to violations of the school's disciplinary policy in several prior decisions. Consistent with those cases, we find the penalty imposed in this case was not unduly harsh. See *Richard Oltman v. Worcester County Board of Education*, MSBE Opinion No. 99-11 (February 23, 1999); *Ryan Rantz v. Worcester County Board of Education*, MSBE Opinion No. 98-47 (August 31, 1998); *Chase Craven v. Board of Education of Montgomery County*, MSBE Opinion No. 97-43 (October 29, 1997); *Michael Schneider v. Board of Education of Montgomery County*, MSBE Opinion No. 97-47 (October 29, 1997).

CONCLUSION

For the reasons noted above, we dismiss this appeal as moot. Alternatively, for the reasons so noted, we would affirm the decision of the Board of Education of Carroll County.

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