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In Baltimore, expulsions are forever

Parents agonize as kids face harsh penalty for school arson, violent behavior

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Everard Grant knows his 16-year-old stepson made a huge mistake when he lit a poster on fire at his Baltimore high school. But he doesn't think he deserves to be shut out of the city's public schools forever.

The boy, Tyrone Jamison, is one of 34 students who have been permanently expelled from Baltimore schools this academic year. That number has increased drastically over previous years because of a decision by schools chief Andrés Alonso to impose the most severe punishment for those caught committing arson or detonating explosives. Students may appeal to the city school board and after that the state board of education, but if the expulsions are upheld, they are never to return to a Baltimore public school.

The school system will cut off home tutoring and alternative school placements for those students in June, and then parents' options will be limited to home-schooling their children or sending them to private schools, as neighboring public school districts typically honor each others' expulsion decisions.

As the end of the school year approaches, parents such as Grant are frantic. Two mothers whose children were permanently expelled from middle schools have secured legal representation with the Maryland Legal Aid Bureau. Parents are legally responsible for enrolling their children in school between the ages of 5 and 16.

"I can't sit home with him. I have to work," said Grant, whose stepson was expelled from the Academy for College and Career Exploration in December, when he was 15. "I can't afford private school."

School system officials say the decision to permanently expel students is a difficult one, but the regulation is working: The number of arsons in city schools has dropped sharply, from 80 last academic year to 47 so far in the school year about to end. Overall, suspensions are down from 13,289 incidents to 9,722. Since taking his job two years ago, Alonso has urged principals not to suspend students for nonviolent offenses but to have no tolerance for violence.

After the explosions of two chemical-filled bottles at Patterson High in October, Alonso wrote an open letter announcing the regulation on permanent expulsions. "This is a painful decision,

because there is nothing that I care about as much as having every single child in Baltimore City at home, learning in one of our schools," Alonso wrote. "But it's a necessary decision given the potential harm to life of such irresponsible and criminal action."

Before this year in Baltimore and typically in surrounding school systems, students who engage in violent behavior such as arson are expelled, but they can attend an alternative school or complete work at home, and eventually they are permitted to return. Last school year, only four students were permanently expelled from Baltimore schools. During the 2006-2007 year, there was just one case.

"The assumption is that when a kid is expelled, they get sent to an alternative school," said Sarah Morgan, a Legal Aid attorney. "The school system is saying you lose your right to an education if you do certain things."

Of the 34 permanent expulsions this year, one was an elementary school student, 13 students were in middle school and 20 were in high school, according to system data. Twenty-two have been for arson; others are for teacher assault and drug or weapon possession.

Morgan questions why, if there were 47 instances of arson, there haven't been 47 students permanently expelled. Officials say they are reviewing incidents case by case.

Morgan's two clients are both 13-year-old eighth-graders accused of setting trash can fires. She said neither had a prior record of discipline problems. One, a girl who was 12 at the time she was accused of setting a fire at Francis Scott Key Elementary/Middle, was a strong student who had been admitted to a competitive magnet high school. The other is a boy who attended Dr. Nathan A. Pitts-Ashburton Elementary/Middle.

Jonathan Brice, the system's executive director for student services, said he understands the families' plight, but "the big issue here is about maintaining the safety and security of 83,000 children every single day." He said many students in city schools have asthma that is exacerbated by fires, and people can be easily hurt during a building evacuation when a fire alarm goes off. The system is sending "a very strong message about what we will accept and what we will not accept," but the overall decline in suspensions shows a commitment to keeping kids in school, he said.

Tyrone admits that he and a friend discussed wanting to get out of school one December morning. He lit a corner of a poster on fire, and his friend, who was also permanently expelled, later set a trash can ablaze, prompting a building evacuation. Tyrone spent a night in jail and was ordered to do 100 community service hours in his criminal case. These days, the city school system is providing Tyrone with instruction in English, algebra and history over the phone, but that will be cut off at the end of the school year. He takes the calls and studies in his parents' bedroom, since his mother runs a day care in the rest of the house.

He recently received a letter saying he had been permanently expelled and had five days to appeal to the city school board. But his stepfather, Grant, said he didn't see the letter until it was too late.

The school system made the case at Tyrone's expulsion hearing that he had behavior problems before the incident and had been suspended for cutting class. Grant said the fire was his first severe infraction.

"I feel today that you have made my son out to be the scapegoat for all of the other fire setting incidents in the Baltimore City Public Schools and it is unfair," Grant, a placement coordinator for the Department of Social Services and substitute teacher in city schools, wrote in a March 17 letter to Alonso. "I know my son and I know he is not the young man you think he is."