

Seventh Graders Drink Before Boarding School Bus

By: Paul Levy, *Star Tribune*, July 19, 2008

In yet another disturbing case of alcohol use among young people, two Spring Lake Park students – who apparently had been drinking before boarding their school bus – were taken by ambulance from Westwood Middle School to a Fridley hospital.

This time, the drinkers were seventh-graders. The two Spring Lake Park students, who apparently had been drinking before boarding their school bus Thursday morning, were taken by ambulance from Westwood Middle School to a Fridley hospital, school officials said Friday.

It was yet another disturbing case of alcohol use among youths. Those cases include a recent string of binge-drinking deaths of college-age Minnesotans. One of the Westwood students became ill and needed assistance getting off the bus, according to a letter sent to Westwood Middle School families, although Joel Young, the school's assistant principal, said the boy was removed from the bus.

School staff called 911 immediately, and the boy remained hospitalized overnight, Principal Paula Hoff said. Hoff said she was told by the boy's mother that he was to be released Friday from Unity Hospital. Hospital officials, citing privacy issues, declined to comment. Later Thursday morning, the other student was determined to be in need of medical services and was also hospitalized, according to the letter sent Thursday to Westwood Middle School families. Hoff said she wasn't aware that the other student was hospitalized overnight.

Westwood Middle School officials had yet to discuss possible disciplinary action concerning participants by the end of Friday's school day, Hoff said. "We're not at that point," she said. "Right now, we're more concerned with health issues." "We don't know how it [alcohol] was consumed," Hoff said. "There was nothing on the bus. The bus driver responded wonderfully. It was not done on the bus."

Alcohol Is Easy To Get

Experts lament that drinking among children of middle-school age can no longer be considered out of the ordinary. Approximately eight percent of seventh-graders and 17 percent of eighthgraders reported engaging in binge drinking during a 12-month period that preceded the release of a 2005 study reported by the American Journal of Public Health.

"The kids we see tell us it is surprisingly easy for an eighth-grader or seventh-grader to get access to alcohol, and they have a perception that it isn't very harmful," said Jim Steinhagen, executive director of the youth continuum program at Hazelden, the Center City-based organization known for its world-class chemical-health treatment centers. "By the time they are 18, kids will see 100,000 beer or alcohol commercials that glamorize drinking," Steinhagen said. "Even as they get older, teenagers don't realize how lethal alcohol consumption can be to developing brains."

