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## Front Page

April 17, 2008

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**Brendan Simpson is arraigned Tuesday in Leominster District Court. Pool Photo**

While Holden Police continue their investigation into the April 14 group assault on a Sterling teen just outside school grounds, the events surrounding that attack spawned fear, rumor, and the consequent dismissal Wednesday of several hundred WRHS students who some parents say felt unsafe.

Four teens have been charged with various crimes connected with the assault, which was caught on cell phone video and then widely distributed. The video showed what police characterized as a vicious beating of a teen by four or more other teens, kicking and hitting with objects, even after the student was lying prone. Another student who came to his aid can be seen being assaulted as well.

Police called to the scene by a neighbor on Sunnyside Avenue, a street adjacent to the high school, arrived after the event was over. Students at the scene made the fight seem like a minor skirmish, Holden Police Chief George Sherrill

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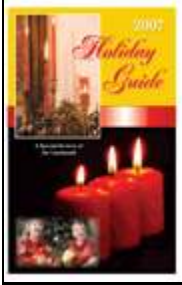
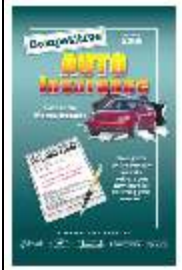
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said. But the video taken during the assault came into police hands an hour after the event and prompted further investigations leading to the arrest of four young men.

Most of the teens involved in the assault are juveniles, whose names are not made public; those age 17 and older are considered adults in the criminal justice system and their information is public. All are free on bail.

A 15-year-old WRHS student from Holden was the first arrested on April 14. He was arraigned Tuesday for assault and battery, assault and battery with a dangerous weapon (ground).

A former Doherty student, a 16-year-old Worcester resident attending WRHS on the school choice program, was charged in Juvenile Court on Tuesday, April 15, after turning himself in. He was released on \$2,500 bail, with some conditions, a court source reported. He is charged with assault and battery and assault and battery with a dangerous weapon (a shod foot) as well as disorderly conduct.

A third suspect, 17-year-old Brendan M. Simpson of 47 Katahdin St., Worcester, was arraigned in Leominster District Court April 16 on charges of assault and battery, assault and battery with a dangerous weapon (metal pipe) and conspiracy. Simpson was arrested April 15 after being brought to the Holden Police station for questioning, an HPD press release states. He is a former Burncoat High School student, not currently attending school.

A fourth suspect was arraigned April 16; he is a 16-year-old Worcester resident who turned himself in after learning of the warrant for his arrest. He is not a WRHS student, and it is unknown whether he attends any other high school.

Police are still investigating what prompted the assault, which they say involved two WRHS students originally, but brought the former Doherty student's Worcester friends into the fray.

The Sterling student who bore the brunt of the attack was treated and released from an area hospital Monday evening; a second Sterling student who came to his aid was also injured and

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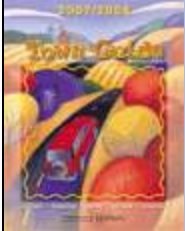
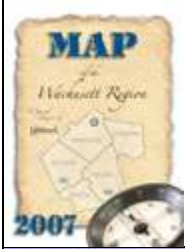
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treated. Police say neither of those students sustained life-threatening injuries.

#### Fear prompts dismissals

Like the widely-viewed cell phone video that was instrumental in helping isolate the events, technology has also aided the spread of rumors -- and the concerns of parents. Text message rumors of possible armed reprisals from Doherty students began to circulate on Tuesday, WRSD Superintendent Thomas Pandiscio said, and continued Wednesday, with students even texting messages that the school was in lockdown.

It wasn't.

While police were present in force at the school and will be all week, parents began to come to the school Wednesday to have their children dismissed out of concern about the rumors of gun violence.

Both Sherrill and Pandiscio said the threat of gun violence was not a credible one.

"A credible school threat would involve a real life event or an artifact that you can put your hands on," Pandiscio said. "We've spent the better part of the day trying to put our hands on that, chasing every lead that we've heard."

Thus far, the threat appears only as a text message, and involves no specific person or event.

There is some irony to a parallel situation, Pandiscio said: another rumor in Worcester had Doherty students fearing similar reprisal from Wachusett students. One of the students involved in the attack is a former Doherty student attending WRHS on the school choice program.

#### School choice not the culprit

School choice, if accepted by a school district, allows the district to accept students from outside the district to attend the school, if it has space and the programs the student requires.

Of the more than 1,900 students at WRHS, only 18 are students from out of town attending the school under the school choice program; 73 other students attend district middle and elementary schools under the program. Once those students are in the system at the lower school level, they stay in the system, if they so choose, throughout their school years.

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Pandiscio said that a district can do background checks on students it accepts into the school choice program, but can only reject them for very serious reasons, carefully laid out by state law.

“The normal school choice procedure is relatively open,” he said. “You can refuse a student for a very, very big disciplinary issue; and you can refuse them based on a program need. But it’s a relatively open process that doesn’t allow you to discriminate.”

Pandiscio said he believes families are making some very good decisions when it comes to the school choice program. There are many parents and students eager to get into the district; and some who have opted out. Students from out of the district have been part of the schools since he can remember, and he doesn’t believe their presence – or absence — would have made any difference.

While the students attacked were from Sterling, one of the alleged attackers is from Holden.


“How much difference did that school choice boy make?” he asked. “The real problem was that a bunch of kids made the choice to go and participate in an event at the railroad tracks [on Sunnyside Avenue]. The trip to the railroad tracks was willingly made by students from the member towns.”

Pandiscio hopes that the school district can send the right message – to parents, who were informed by a two reverse 911 calls of the situation on April 15 and 16, and to students, who need to know that the behavior won’t be tolerated.

“I’m going to enlist the school committee’s aid in expelling these students,” Pandiscio said.

The district can typically expel students for very serious reasons: drugs, weapons, assault on school personnel, or a felony.

The school committee also can vote to expel students for fighting, and Pandiscio says to do so would “send a clear message to the school district, to take a public stand at a public meeting.”



The district will hold a meeting at the high school on April 17, Pandiscio said, to help parents and students with the situation.

But as a former school principal, he can't help thinking about what the students might be needing right now.

"They're waiting for us to send the right messages," he said.

Among those messages might for students to inform school officials of such an event, which Pandiscio and police say was planned and rumored all day Monday. Students might have headed off the event by telling staff or police, or by calling police when the attack began. It was nearly an hour after the event that police learned what had happened.