

# Needville High teen arsonist gets 10 years' probation

■ School damage in April fire totaled at least \$6 million

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**RICHMOND** — The teen who admitted setting fire to Needville High School last year was sentenced to 10 years' probation by a judge.

The boy was 16 years old and a sophomore at the school when he used gasoline to set the blaze. The early morning fire on April 23 destroyed a large portion of the building and heavily damaged other parts of the structure, causing at least \$6 million in damages.

Investigators did not reveal a motive for the fire.

Prosecutors asked for the maximum punishment of 40 years confinement, but visiting Judge Dennis Watson ordered probation for the youth, who is now 17.

"It appears he was primarily concerned with the rehabilitation of a single individual as opposed to punishing him for what he did," Fort Bend County District Attorney John Healey said Thursday.

Needville school superintendent Curtis Rhodes, who had earlier called for the teenager to be certified as an adult for trial, did not criticize the judge's decision but said the entire episode has been a learning experience.

"I'm not going to second-guess the judge. He is in a position for a reason and I respect his decision, but it does make me scratch my head," Rhodes said.

Rhodes said school officials are still totaling up the cost of the damage and said ultimately the final bill will probably be from \$6 million to \$7 million.

The damage from the fire

forced school administrators to reshuffle classroom hours and assignments for the high school's 820 students. The blaze also destroyed TAKS test result booklets, forcing the 10th- and 11th-grade students to retake the state-mandated exam.

Fort Bend County prosecutors sought in October to have the boy certified as an adult to stand trial, but Watson denied the request and the case remained in the juvenile justice system.

On Tuesday, the boy, whose name is being held by the Houston Chronicle because of his age, pleaded guilty to the arson charge and, following a two-day hearing, was granted probation by Watson.

The decision was issued late Wednesday afternoon.

The youth's attorney, Steven Rocket Rosen, said the remorseful teen has been a model citizen since the fire and has complied with all orders of the court.

"The judge gave him the benefit of the doubt because of his age and because he has really shown in the past eight, nine months that he wants to be productive in society," Rosen said.

The case was heard by Watson, of County Court at Law No. 1 in Montgomery County, because presiding Judge Ben W. "Bud" Childers asked in October that a visiting judge hear the matter.

Childers said then he had received numerous letters from mainly Needville residents demanding the teen be certified as an adult.

"The reason I requested another judge was because of the efforts of the people in Needville to bias the court and coerce the court into a decision based on their emotional input on this case," Childers said at the time.

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