

PRESS RELEASE FROM SUPERINTENDENT MARK KOLWE

I have received many phone calls and emails regarding the recent incident concerning Andrew Jones, an Amite High School honor student who was not allowed to participate in the graduation ceremony at that school this year. In order to clarify what happened, I feel that a full explanation of the situation is in order.

The Tangipahoa Parish School Board Student Dress Code Policy states that "beards will not be allowed." As Superintendent, I am obligated to ensure that all Board policies are followed.

In April 2016, each Amite High School senior (including Andrew) was presented with a document that included requirements for participation in the graduation ceremony. That document clearly stated that all students were to be clean shaven for the graduation ceremony.

On May 9, 2016, in the presence (via speaker phone) of Andrew's mother and his aunt, the Amite High School administrator spoke to Andrew and reminded him that, if he wanted to participate in graduation practice and the actual graduation ceremony, he would have to be clean shaven.

During graduation practice, the principal noticed a number of male students who were not clean shaven. At that time, she gave these students (including Andrew) the following three options: 1) come to graduation clean shaven and participate therein; 2) come to graduation and use shaving cream and razors that would be available at the site to become clean shaven and participate therein; or 3) come to graduation without being clean shaven, refuse to become clean shaven, and not be allowed to participate in the ceremony. The administrator also reiterated to the students that the dress code requirements given to them on April 29, 2016 would be enforced on graduation night.

Andrew Jones was one of four Amite High School male graduates who arrived at the graduation ceremony unshaven. Three of the four shaved in the restroom at SLU with the razor provided by Amite High School. Andrew was the only one of the four who refused to shave. At the graduation ceremony, the teacher in charge noticed that Andrew was not clean shaven and asked him if he was going to shave before the ceremony began. Andrew replied that he was not going to do so. A male teacher from Amite High School approached Andrew regarding shaving and, again, he refused. A second male teacher asked Andrew about shaving, and he again said that he was not going to do so.

At this time, the teachers informed the principal that Andrew refused to shave and said that Andrew stated to them that he would watch the graduation from upstairs in the spectator seats. After hearing this, the principal asked one of the teachers to please get the robe from Andrew. The principal then went into the stands to speak with Andrew's mother regarding his refusal to shave. His mother asked his father to go speak with him about his decision. When asked, Andrew relinquished his robe to the teacher without questions or comments. After this, two other Amite High School teachers spoke with Andrew regarding his decision not to shave and he replied that he would receive his diploma whether he participated in the ceremony or not. One of the teachers questioned Andrew about how his mother would react to his decision not to participate and Andrew replied that his mother had tried to convince him to shave, but he refused.

As Superintendent, I try to attend all high school graduation ceremonies in the parish and was present for the ceremony at Amite High School that evening. The school's principal told me about the situation, and I immediately went to speak with Andrew's dad and with Mr. Walter Daniels, Tangipahoa Parish School Board Member from District A. Prior to the beginning of the ceremony, I directed one of the Amite High School teachers to give Andrew the shaving cream and razor and tell him that, if he shaved right away, he could still participate in the processional and take his place on stage with the other graduates. The teacher conveyed the message; however, at that time, Andrew's dad confirmed to her

that Andrew was not going to participate. Andrew remained in the stands during the graduation exercises and received his diploma after the ceremony.

The policy of the Tangipahoa Parish School Board (and many other school systems) is that male students cannot have facial hair. This policy was explained to the student in question on multiple occasions prior to graduation day, and the consequences for failing to comply with that policy were explained to him and his parents on multiple occasions on graduation day. The student's parents tried to convince him to shave, but he ignored their requests and the requests of school officials whose duty was to seek compliance with Board policy.

It is regrettable that any student -- particularly an honor student like Andrew-- would not get to participate in his high school graduation ceremony, a ceremony that comes along only once in the lifetime of every student. In this case, however, Andrew made that decision for himself by failing to comply with the reasonable requests made by his parents and school officials that he comply with the rules applicable to all other students.