

Strip search was bad call

It was a bad move March 6, when Halifax police Const. Carol Campbell ordered three St. Pat's-Alexandra junior high school girls to strip so she could find \$10 stolen from a student volunteer. It was bad for the girls, bad for the school, and bad for the cops.

Vice-principal Peter Wicha asked Campbell, who was present at the school investigating a \$300 theft, to investigate a further missing \$10. Principal Vanroy Tobbit was present when the three girls were questioned.

"Nobody would admit to anything and it was quite obvious they weren't telling us the truth," Tobbit told *The Daily Nezes*.

While Wicha must have felt good to actually have a possible culprit in hand, he didn't have the right to tell Campbell to search the girls without their parents present and a formal arrest made. The parents weren't even called until after the fact. That Wicha says he didn't know the girls would be strip-searched isn't an excuse.

Adolescence is a tough time for girls trying to cope with the changes going on in their bodies and deal with their need for privacy. We teach our kids to say "no" to inappropriate touching and to have self-worth.

"I don't think it's right," Glenda Voeltz, a parent of one of the girls, told the *North End News*. "She gets embarrassed if I walk in on her in the bathroom, so how do you think she felt having this done to her?"

School is a place where the administrators and teachers act in *loco parentis*. While our children are there, we need to trust that those on-site parents will act in our children's best interests.

It is irresponsible and callous that principal Tobbit tried to transfer the blame to the police when he said the school did nothing wrong and the search was a police matter.

Wicha has since bumped the matter to Halifax school board's director of education Gordon Young, who says he's not going to look at it until a possible police investigation is completed.

Why not? In this era when we arrest and try teachers and school officials for violating our children, we need clear policies on protecting kids' rights. Children need to feel safe while they're in school.

Administrators should handle these small matters of theft and discipline on site with parents' knowledge and consent before making them official police business. Then, they must follow established procedures.

The parents now have a good case for a police disciplinary action or a civil suit against the police, Halifax lawyer Walter Thompson of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association suggested to the *North End News*.

The one bright note in this sad story seems to be Const. Campbell, who called both mothers and apologized.

While it's good she apologized, the police need to think before they act if they want to develop trust in a community already leery of heavy-handed police tactics.