

# Student faces expulsion for fake drill team guns

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AURORA - A local school district has suspended a member of the Young Marines youth leadership group after students saw drill props in her vehicle.

Marie Morrow, a 17-year-old senior at Cherokee Trail High School in Aurora, is serving a 10-day suspension. Her punishment could be extended at an expulsion hearing later this month.

Morrow is a student leader in the Douglas County Young Marines, a group dedicated to teaching leadership and life skills.

Cherry Creek Schools suspended Morrow after other students reported seeing guns inside her SUV, which was parked outside school while she was in class. The school also called police, who seized the three drill team guns made of wood, plastic and duct tape. Police told Morrow to claim them in time for her after-school drill practice off-campus. School administrators, however, were less understanding. The guns were declared "authentic representations of genuine weapons," triggering a mandatory expulsion statute in state law. "I have never been in trouble at all," said Morrow, who is planning to attend the United States Merchant Marine Academy. "I hadn't imagined in a million years that anything like this would have happened."

Chris Proctor, commanding officer of the Douglas County Young Marines, was rebuffed in his attempt to explain the props to school leaders. "There's no mistaking that these are not real rifles," said Proctor. "I think somewhere along the line, logic has to take over and they have to be able to make exceptions to the rules."

"Marie is one of the best kids that you could ever imagine," he said.

"I could see where the school could be freaked out about it," said Morrow. "But I think there should be some leeway with the law based on situations and realize this is just an honest mistake."

"The law doesn't make any distinction between a genuine weapon and a facsimile," said Cherry Creek Schools spokeswoman Tustin Amole. Amole says federal and state laws mandate expulsion, and that school districts only have discretion to determine the length of that expulsion.

Asked who had the discretion to deem the props "dangerous weapons," Amole said school administrators and police made the decision based on state law that defines a "dangerous weapon" as "a firearm, whether loaded or unloaded, or a firearm facsimile that could reasonably be mistaken for an actual firearm." Amole said the props in Morrow's vehicle caused concern among students and administrators who made an "assumption" that the weapons appeared "genuine."

Morrow's mother grew emotional while saying she hoped her daughter would continue her volunteer and service work despite the incident. "I just don't want it to affect her view on the world, (make her believe) that people who do the right thing don't come out on top," said her mother, Jennifer McGrew. "I've always kind of really looked up to my daughter for having a mind of her own and going places that I never even dreamed."

A hearing officer could recommend Morrow be allowed back in school after her 10-day suspension or could expel her for as much as the rest of her senior year. The final decision belongs to the Cherry Creek Schools superintendent. Morrow, who has already secured the necessary recommendation from a member of Congress to attend the Merchant Marine Academy, has been told an expulsion would not derail her eventual acceptance to the Academy. "As long as I can get my diploma, I guess everything else will work itself out," said Morrow, who explained she's trying to focus on her planned career of service. "It's not going to be the end of the world."