

California third-graders caught smoking pot in school bathroom

By Steve Gorman | March 5, 2014

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(Reuters) - Three third-graders were caught smoking marijuana in the boys' bathroom of their northern California elementary school last week in what the local police chief says marked the youngest pot bust he has ever encountered.

The three boys - two 8-year-olds and one 9-year-old - were caught last Thursday by another student, who informed school administrators, who in turn alerted local law enforcement, said Sonora Police Chief Mark Stinson.

Police officers detained the youngsters for questioning, then released them to their parents, Stinson said.

The police chief of Sonora, a picturesque "Gold Country" town in the Sierra foothills about 130 miles east of San Francisco, said the youngest person he previously knew of being busted for smoking pot was about 10 years of age.

A pipe and a very small amount of marijuana were seized in last Thursday's incident, he said, adding that the boys seemed to have had little smoking experience and did not appear to be under the influence when confronted.

Stinson declined to comment on anything the boys said, or on the possible origins of the pot, except to say that "it came from several sources."

He said the incident will remain under investigation to determine whether the boys could be considered criminally culpable. Under California law, no one under 12 is usually charged with a crime, but the boys could be subject to juvenile justice proceedings.

"The first step is - we have to determine whether they knew right from wrong," he told Reuters.

The superintendent of the local school district, Leigh Shampain, declined to comment on any details of the case but confirmed that students had been caught smoking marijuana in the school restroom last week.

Both he and the police chief said the case underscores concerns that legalizing marijuana for recreational use by adults in California would make it easier for minors to gain access to pot in the future.

Said Stinson, "It's something to think about."

California in 1996 became the first of 20 U.S. states to allow marijuana use for medical purposes, and a Field Poll in December found that 55 percent of registered voters supported expanding legalization to recreational use.

Colorado and Washington state approved ballot measures doing just that in November 2012. The last time such a proposal was put to California voters, in 2010, it was defeated.

(Reporting by Steve Gorman; Editing by Dan Whitcomb and Gunna Dickson)