

23 of 1000 DOCUMENTS



November 17, 2005 Thursday  
Final Edition

## Readers Raise Concerns About Past Work of Top Principal

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**SECTION:** Fairfax Extra; T10

**LENGTH:** 697 words

After I wrote an article about J.E.B. Stuart High School principal Mel Riddile being named national high school principal of the year ["A Principal's Wide Reach; Head of Fairfax School Wins National Award," Metro, Oct. 23], I received many messages praising his success at raising achievement at a school full of low-income students.

I also received messages from people campaigning against the tough-love approach to adolescent **drug** abuse rehabilitation practiced by **Straight** Inc., a company that Riddile worked for in the 1980s. **Straight** Inc., founded in 1976 in Florida by Mel Sembler, a former U.S. ambassador to Italy, and his wife, Betty, went out of existence in 1993. The Semblers have since started the **Drug** Free America Foundation ([www.dfaf.org](http://www.dfaf.org)), a **drug** prevention and policy group.

Here is an excerpt of one of the e-mails about Riddile and **Straight**:

Dear Extra Credit:

I would like to take this opportunity to advise you of the fact that Dr. Riddile was executive/regional director at **Straight** Inc. for several years back in the 1980s, an organization some parents have accused of systematically physically and psychologically abusing their children. Unfortunately, time does not heal all wounds.

In your article published about Dr. Riddile and his outstanding accomplishments in his role as principal of J.E.B. Stuart, his involvement with **Straight** is missing. Treatment similar to that used by **Straight** is still administered in programs called by different names. It is quite possibly the most dangerous **drug** treatment program ever to exist in this country. Dr. Riddile trained **Straight** directors in the same building in Ohio in which one of these programs currently operates.

I find it necessary to advise your paper of these facts as part of a movement to expose this ongoing tragedy. I made several requests this year to invite Dr. Riddile to speak out against this treatment program. He claimed that he knew

Readers Raise Concerns About Past Work of Top Principal The Washington Post November 17, 2005 Thursday

nothing about the specific program in Ohio. But he trained people who engaged in similar treatment modalities. I advised him of this situation in 2003. The requests have been either ignored or denied.

I believe Dr. Riddile knows about the problems associated with the **Straight** treatment. Please urge him to speak out against this abuse now.

William Earnshaw Sr.

Midland, Va.

In my article, I did not mention Riddile's **drug** abuse work, both for Fairfax County and then for **Straight**, because I didn't think it was relevant to the topic -- how he turned Stuart High into a top educational institution. But I appreciate your concern about **Straight**, which you told me grew out of what you said you experienced as mistreatment under the program when you were a client.

The Post has published many stories about **Straight**. They make it clear that there has been much debate over the usefulness of **drug** treatment programs that place young clients under strict discipline, as **Straight** did. The articles note that one young client won an initial verdict of \$220,000 in damages in 1983 after complaining of being detained for more than four months in a **Straight** facility in Springfield.

But according to the information I received from both you and Riddile, he was never sued or charged with any crime. Nor did you or any of the other sources you cited ever witness him do anything wrong. Riddle said he has many letters from **Straight** clients thanking him for what he did for them and said he is proud of his work there. I recommend that readers interested in this issue perform a Google search on **Straight** Inc. and do their own reading.

Having watched Riddile's work at Stuart for the last eight years, I am convinced that he deserved the award he received and does not deserve these criticisms for work he did in the 1980s that many of his young clients and their families have praised him for. Riddile is one of the 10 best high school principals I have ever seen, and I think Fairfax County is lucky to have him.

Please send your questions, along with your name, e-mail or postal address and telephone number to Extra Credit, The **Washington Post**, 526 King St., Suite 515, Alexandria, Va. 22314. Or e-mail [extracredit@washpost.com](mailto:extracredit@washpost.com).

**LOAD-DATE:** November 17, 2005

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

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