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STATE & NATION

Page 10 THE BATTALION Thursday, February 20, 2000

Teens charged with murder

Two Houston firefighters die in McDonald's arson, burglary

HOUSTON (AP) — One night they were busy burglarizing a McDonald's, police said, using a blowtorch to cut into the safe for a much larger payday than any of them made in their own jobs at other franchises in the fast-food chain.

Less than 24 hours later, the three young men were rounded up and accused of two counts of felony murder each because an inferno at the restaurant killed veteran firefighters Lewis Mayo III, 44, and Kimberly Smith, 30.

Allen Gerome Davis, 17, and brothers Pedro Isreal Loreda, 19, and Juan Manuel Torres, 17, made initial court appearances this morning in magistrate's court. State District Judge Mary Lou Keel canceled their appearances in her court, and scheduled their arraignments for March 14.

A bond hearing is set Friday for Loreda and Torres, whose bonds were raised from \$50,000 to \$100,000 after prosecutors expressed concern the suspects' family was planning to move to Mexico. Defense attorneys denied their clients, who are brothers, intended to flee the country.

Davis, whose bond remained at \$50,000, was described as "sad, upset, remorseful, unhappy," by his lawyer, Alan Percely.

"There are a lot of people surprised by this. It's a tragedy," Percely said.

An alleged 15-year-old accomplice, who worked at the restaurant that burned Monday and was demolished Tuesday, remained in custody pending juvenile charges. He eventually could be charged as an adult under Texas law.

"We questioned the employee, and ultimately that led to other suspects," Houston police Capt. Richard Holland said. "Warrants were obtained on the individuals involved and they were subsequently arrested, questioned and confessed their involvement."

A blowtorch allegedly used in the burglary is thought to have touched off the fire, officials said. Fire Chief Lester Tyra said it was unclear whether the fire was accidentally or intentionally started.

Authorities initially summoned the juvenile from class at Elsie High School because he closed the restaurant Sunday night, Holland said. As questioning Monday and investigators began to suspect a crime, Holland said the teen was arrested and implicated the others.

Torres and Loreda were arrested at their apartment around 9:55 p.m. Monday. Davis was picked up around 2 a.m. Tuesday. There are no other suspects, he said.

"In the last 24 hours, I've been through all sorts of emotions," Tyra said. "I'm not sure, whether it was an accident or whether it was arson, it doesn't bring back the memories of Lewis or Smith."

Funeral services for Smith, the department's first woman killed in the line of duty, were pending her parents' arrival from Fountain Valley, Calif. Services for Mayo were held Tuesday at Rice Stadium, the city's largest sporting venue.

Classroom Internet use shows increase since '94

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nearly every public school in America has an Internet connection, with access jumping from a little over one-third of schools to 95 percent in just five years, the Education Department said Wednesday.

The rapid expansion from 1994 to 1999, say school technology supporters, is due to everything from increased donations by technology companies eager to train future workers to Clinton administration efforts such as the E-rate program — funded by a special fee on phone bills — that helps provide discounted Internet connections for schools and libraries.

"Technology can improve student performance and provide the competitive skills necessary for future success," said Education Secretary Richard Riley.

"It is critical that we provide a link for those in the smallest towns to the largest cities."

Edith McArthur, a department demographer who conducted the study, said, "It looks like schools are actually responding to the recognized need for access. There's a lot of pressure to connect."

The connecting appears to have brought the Internet to more school-children, she said.

In 1999, on average there were nine students for every one instructional computer with Internet access nationwide. The previous year, on average, the ratio was 12 students for each such computer, the report said.

The E-rate program has committed more than \$3.6 billion over the past two years to assist schools and libraries in paying for discounted Internet connections.

Officials say the program has helped connect more than 1 million classrooms to the Internet, mostly by helping them pay for internal wiring.

The money comes from fees imposed on telecommunications companies, which pass them on to customers in phone bills.

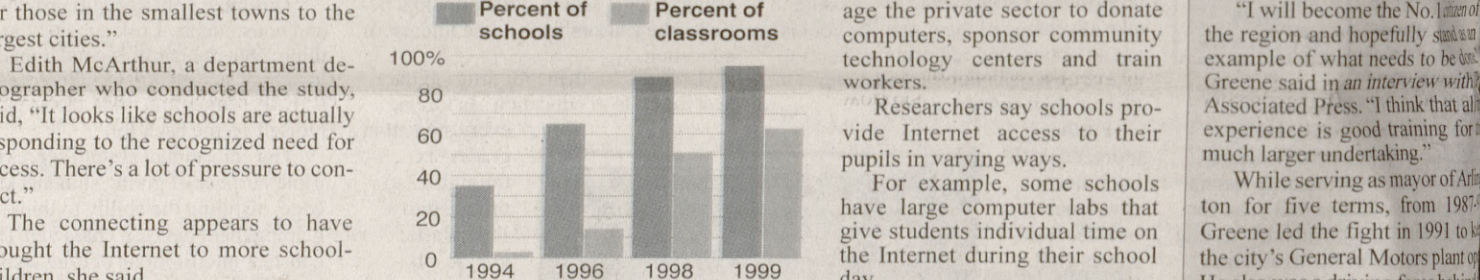
States also have pumped funds into computers, telecommunications and Internet access.

But critics worry that the momentum could wane as policy makers realize the high cost of such technology. Louisiana, for example, gave school districts \$38 million for technology in 1997-98.

The next year it gave \$25 million, and for 1999-2000, the districts received \$14 million.

Internet boom in the classroom

The number of public schools with Internet access has increased dramatically along with the number of classrooms with Internet connections.



In addition, there is a better ratio of students per computer in both small and large schools.

| Enrollment | '98 | '99 |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----|
| Enrollment of less than 300 | 9 | 6 |
| Enrollment of 1,000 or more | 13 | 10 |

Note: Survey was based on 1,000 public elementary and secondary schools. The margin of error is plus or minus 1 to 3 percentage points.

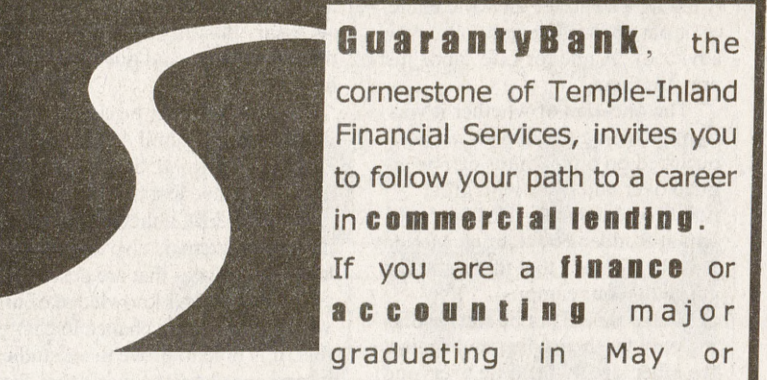
Source: U.S. Department of Education AP

connections (14 percent). The survey was based on a nationally representative sample of about 1,000 public elementary and secondary schools in the fall of 1999. The margin of error is plus or minus 1 to 3 percentage points.

The also found that 39 percent of classrooms in high-poverty schools have Internet access, while 74 percent of classrooms in low-poverty schools are connected to the Internet.

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