



Truancy officer preyed on girls

By AARON LEAMAN - Waikato Times Last updated 12:13 27/11/2009

A Hamilton truancy officer convicted of sexually abusing four female students used a school pilot scheme to identify and groom troubled teens, a court has been told.

Mark Pene, 54, was sentenced yesterday in the Hamilton District Court to six years and three months' jail after pleading guilty to indecent assault, having sexual connection with a girl under 16, doing an indecent act with a girl under 16 and doing an indecent act on a girl under 12.

The charges related to offending against four girls, aged 11 to 17, between 2005 and 2008.

At the time, Pene was employed as a truancy officer in Hamilton, working with troubled teenagers and their families.

Pene gained access to two of his victims by inviting them to take part in a school pilot scheme. The programme included such benefits as free lunches, payment of school fees and money for clothing.

Pene yesterday sat impassively in the dock as details of his offending were revealed, moving only to shield his face from a Waikato Times photographer.

Crown prosecutor Richard Annandale said the victims' ages made them exceptionally vulnerable to Pene's predatory behaviour.

Pene chose his victims carefully, preying on their immaturity and their adolescent "needs and wants".

On one occasion, Pene offered a victim money to pose nude for photos before encouraging her to engage in sexual acts.

Mr Annandale said Pene effectively used the school pilot scheme "to craft his offending".

A pre-sentence report assessed Pene at high risk of reoffending.

Mr Annandale said Pene's previous good character and lack of relevant convictions aided his offending. Victim impact statements revealed the traumatic effect of his offending. Many of the girls said they now had difficulties trusting males.

Defence counsel Charles Bean submitted Pene's behaviour was opportunistic rather than pre-meditated.

He said Pene was proud of his work as a truancy officer but was deeply embarrassed and remorseful for his offending.

Pene's guilty pleas came 11 days before his trial date.

Judge Robert Spear said Pene's offending was brazen, callous and deplorable. "The community is disgusted by what you did," he told Pene.

He rejected defence submissions that Pene's behaviour was opportunistic, saying it represented a "carefully planned scheme". He said Pene remained a serious risk to women and young girls and imposed a non-

parole period of 3 1/2 years.

Judge Spear said it was questionable whether Pene understood the harm his behaviour had caused.