



Keeping our Students Safe: Teacher's Responsibility

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Abstract

During their lunch period, a second grade student began choking on his sandwich. A teacher noticed the student choking and walked with him to the office on the other side of the school. When the student and teacher got to the office, the school secretary performed CPR but the student had already passed out. 911 was called while the secretary continued to perform CPR. When the ambulance arrived, the EMTs also performed CPR and the student was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. When interviewed by the police and district personnel, the teacher who had escorted the student to the office said she did not perform the Heimlich maneuver because she had just discovered she was pregnant.

Key words: Safety, Student and Teacher Rights, Communication Policies

CASE NARRATIVE

Worth ISD is a suburban school district on the outskirts of a major metropolitan area. Worth serves approximately 25,000 students and has 24 elementary schools. Jenks Elementary School, one of the 24 elementary schools in Worth ISD, is a unique school in many ways. First, it sits in the middle of two upper-middle class neighborhoods but buses students in from other areas of town. It also serves as bilingual magnet campus so it serves an extremely diverse population of students.

The lunchroom at Jenks Elementary School is a large, bright area situated on the far end of the school. On duty, there are always one teacher and three paraprofessionals monitoring lunch throughout each lunch period. Each grade level has its own lunch period, which average 80 students. The second grade had a slightly smaller number at 76 students. During lunch one day, a second grade student began choking on his sandwich. After a teacher noticed the student choking, she escorted him to the office. Due to the school layout, the office was on the other side of the school. Per district guidelines, there was only a school nurse there two days a week and this was not one of those days.

When the student and teacher got to the office, the school secretary did her best to perform CPR but the student had already passed out. 911 was called, and the secretary continued to perform CPR. When the ambulance arrived, the EMTs continued performed CPR and the student was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead.

When interviewed by the police and district personnel, the teacher who had escorted the student to the office said she did not perform the Heimlich maneuver because she had just discovered she was pregnant and did not want to risk hurting her pregnancy. The teacher continued to say this to anyone who would listen as well.

The principal was not on campus when this occurred, and the assistant principal was out for the day with a sick child. The superintendent immediately came to the campus, but the ambulance had already left with the student. The superintendent then went to the hospital to be with the family. The school secretary was inconsolable, and the teacher stood in the office continuing to say that she was pregnant.

At this time, the principal was called back to the campus to deal with the crisis. He first wrote a note that was sent home with each of the students explaining that there was a death of a student on campus that day. The content of the letter was brief and included only the scarcest of details. The students however, shared a great deal of information with their parents and the parents shared it with one another. When the parents spoke to the teacher about what had occurred, she reiterated she didn't want to risk her pregnancy.

By late afternoon, there were multiple television news crews present at Jenks Elementary. As parents were picking up their children from school, they were being interviewed about what had occurred without having any knowledge yet of the incident.

The principal called a mandatory staff meeting after school where he shared the information of the student's death. He explained the student had choked on a piece of food in the cafeteria, had been transported to the office area, collapsed and subsequently died at the hospital. Immediately, the faculty and staff began asking questions regarding the crisis plan that was reviewed at the beginning of the year. This designated procedures for emergency situations, identified individuals who were certified in CPR, and chain of command information. Additionally, the majority of the group expressed indignation that the teacher did not perform the Heimlich.

After the meeting, the principal sat in his office reflecting on the day. Not only had the worst possible thing happened- the loss of a child. His campus was now in crisis. As of the end of the meeting, teachers were arguing with each other, voices were raised and tears were shed. His secretary had put up a good front, but he was concerned about her as well. She had stayed at school attempting to shield him from the media and angry teachers when she, herself, was traumatized. How had it come to this? What could he have done differently?

TEACHING NOTES

When is a child's safety more important than personal needs? As teachers and administrators, it is our responsibility to keep children safe. It is every student's right to be safe on their campus. After this incident, it was evident that the students did not feel safe. Some of the students refused to eat during lunchtime and were fearful of even eating in their classrooms. Multiple parents asked for their children to be moved to another teacher's class after finding out that the teacher did not assist one of her students in a life-threatening situation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following discussion questions are set to facilitate discussion as a class but also can be used in a small group setting.

- Consulting an Educator's Code of Conduct, was the teacher within her ethical guidelines regarding child safety?
- If you were the administrator, would there be any disciplinary repercussions for the teacher? What? Why?
- Was there proper supervision in the cafeteria? Reflecting on this scenario, where was the breakdown in supervision?

- If you were the principal of this school and came back to this happening, what would be your next step?
- Based upon this reading, what aspects of climate and culture are present in this school?
- What impact do you think that this had on the teachers in the school?
- What would your response be when the parents asked for a transfer out of the teacher's classroom? How would you handle the teacher reassignment?

ACTIVITIES

The following activities can be completed both in class and out of class. They are also set so that they can be used as an individual assignment, group discussion assignment, or group assignment.

- Construct the note that should go home with the students about the incident.
- If you were the principal of the school, create a school wide action plan that might have stopped this incident from occurring.
- Create a media package to deal with this occurrence. How would you have dealt with the media on campus? Outline the steps you would take for dealing with the media including a statement to them.