

Case Study: The Black Armband Activity

Background:

You are the principal of a sixth through eighth grade middle school in an affluent community. Also members of the school's administrative system are a dean of students and an assistant principal. This is your third year as the school's principal, and you have a sterling reputation of handling situations swiftly and appropriately. The school board supports the majority of your decisions and the community values your presence in the building.

Each of the three grades consists of approximately 300 students divided among three different teams. Using teams to create a sense of community for the students and cooperative working units for the staff has been a successful strategy and is appreciated by the teachers. Each team is permitted the freedom to teach lessons from the grade's designated curricular material in a manner of its own choosing. This provides the restrictions necessary to be sure the teachers teach standard related material while also allowing the teachers the liberty to construct lessons that match their teaching style.

The eighth grade "Challengers" team consists of five teachers, four of whom are tenured, and one who is a first year teacher. To enhance the team's study of World War II and the Holocaust, the teachers developed an experiment that they would conduct among the students titled the "Black Armband Activity." To begin this study, the teachers explained to the students that they would select ten volunteers for one week to recreate the harsh and unfavorable environment experienced by those persecuted in the Holocaust. It was also explained to the

students that only while taking classes by the team teachers would the experiment be in effect. It was reiterated that during elective classes, lunch, and outside of school this experiment was to be paused. The teachers then passed out permission forms and explained that only those who volunteer themselves and who receive permission from their parents or guardians would be considered as subjects for the experiment.

The following week the experiment began. Ten students who had volunteered and received adult permission were chosen to wear black armbands to signify their inferiority. Throughout the week these students were scolded for incidents that were not their fault, given additional homework to complete for their classmates, forced to sit on the floor without the luxury of using a desk to write on, and sent to the hallway whenever a movie or a particularly fun activity was in progress. The experiment, while harsh and cruel in nature, seemed to be progressing as planned. The students seemed to understand that discrimination, regardless of the severity, is unfair and should not be tolerated. All of the students in the class were naturally playing the roles of Germans during the time of the Holocaust. Some were supporting and helping those with the armbands, some were ignoring them, and others were enjoying their suffering. On the third day of the armband activity parents of the volunteer “victims” began complaining to you that their children were being severely victimized beyond the parameters of the experiment. The parents were concerned that the teachers were not in control of their classroom activity and that the bullying would continue past the conclusion of

the experiment. With this information, you felt further investigation needed to occur to evaluate this experiment and the influence it had had on the students.

As it turns out, the students seem to be having a difficult time separating reality from this experiment. The students who have been chosen to wear the armbands are being bullied outside of class, and their *Facebook* pages have been littered with cruel and hateful messages. Despite the warnings and preliminary instructions given by the teachers prior to the beginning of the activity, the students are being bullied outside of the classroom and outside of school. This experiment has taken on a life of its own beyond the control of the teachers.

Parents are coming to you to handle this situation. The teachers would like to continue the activity for the final two days of the week, but the parents are demanding an immediate end to the experiment and consequences for teachers and students involved in the tormenting of their children. Their demands include suspending or dismissing the involved teachers in response to their reckless and irresponsible promotion of bullying. The parents are concerned that if the teachers felt as though this activity was a safe and effective method of teaching, that the teachers may not be well-suited to lead young adolescents in learning. Also, the parents are insisting that the bullies be suspended for their actions, as they are the ones who have most directly harmed their children. Lastly, the parents are requesting an opportunity to meet with you, the teachers, and the other parents of the students involved to share their frustrations with the activity and the effects it had on their children.

Assignment:

As the principal, how will you react to this situation? Should the activity be continued and/or repeated next year? What repercussions do the teachers deserve as creators and instigators of this activity? Should the non-tenured teacher on the team be treated differently than the four tenured teachers? Should the students who are bullying the armband participants be held accountable for their actions? How will you satisfy the demand of the parents for repercussions?