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I THINK



...that I will die a violent death.



When Writing Predicts Violence

Knowing legal guidelines and effective writing instruction can help principals determine when violent writing is threatening behavior or merely creative expression.

I began my public school English teaching career shortly after Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris shot and killed 15 people, including themselves, and wounded 34 others at Columbine High School. Their actions left a nation of school administrators wondering how they could prevent the same thing from happening in their schools.

Shortly after the shootings, I ran across a *New York Times* article discussing the Columbine shooters and, in particular, their writing for English class. Klebold had written a story describing a shooting, but after his English teacher raised concerns, he convinced his mother and the school counselor that it was “just a story.” For a classroom assignment to write an essay from the point of view of an inanimate object, Harris wrote from the viewpoint of a shotgun shell. In addition, two years before the shooting, the students had created a video wherein

they wore black trench coats, carried guns through the school hallways, and appeared to cause explosions as they left the building (Brooke, 1999).

I read another article about the regret an English teacher felt about not reporting the contents of a student’s writing until after he shot and killed four students and one teacher in Jonesboro, AR. The student had been asked to write an essay about why he had been assigned in-school suspension earlier in the day. In the essay, the student expressed the desire to shoot “squirrels,” referring to the teachers and students who had upset him during an altercation over a hat he was prohibited from wearing to school. Although the actual shooting occurred more than a year later, one teacher noted that English teachers should pay attention to warning signs that arise in student writing (Heard, 1999).

I began to wonder about my own teaching and the teaching of English in general. After all, it is not bad practice to have students write from the viewpoint of an inanimate object or to express their views and ideas about life. The teaching models I studied in English methods classes encouraged free

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writing. But where was the line? Could I get in trouble for giving such an assignment? Who could help me figure this out? Was there really a problem with how I learned to teach English and how the real world really worked?

Several items in the news caught my attention. In 2000, students in a Massachusetts school were given the assignment to “write a horror story about a mysterious person” and were told no subject was off-limits. One student wrote a story in which the main character attacked his English teacher with a chain saw. The student was suspended (and eventually reinstated) under the school’s disciplinary code that prohibited students from making threats (“Boston Schools Drop,” 2000).

In 2007, a straight-A student in Illinois was arrested on the basis of the content of his English assignment. The teacher had instructed her students to write continuously for 30 minutes and not to censor as they wrote. The student wrote an essay in which he shot several people at school and then had sex with the dead bodies. The student was removed from school for “safety concerns.” The student was eventually reinstated. One Chicago attorney who represents students in discipline cases said, “I think the schools are very inconsistent with how they respond.... In some cases, they actually set kids up to be creative and then turn around and clobber them if they express violent thoughts” (Keilman & Ford, 2007, para. 19). Those news stories, in addition to others, were troublesome not only because they attempted to limit student expression in direct contradiction with the given assignment but also because they revealed that there is no consistent response in such situations.

Guidelines for Principals


The public school administrator is responsible for protecting student expression while maintaining the integrity of the school disciplinary practices. When dealing with violent writing by students, school administrators should be aware of governing legal principles as well as sound educational practices. A review of legal and educational literature about violent expression by students led to the development of the following set of guidelines.

Be confident that some student expression can be regulated. Students who write violent works are not wholly protected by the First Amendment right to freedom of expression. Four U.S. Supreme Court cases limit students’ right to expression. When restricting violent writing, administrators should know which Supreme Court case applies to their situation.

Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District (1969) held that administrators can restrict student expression if a school authority can reasonably forecast “substantial disruption or material interference with school activities.” *Bethel School District v. Fraser* (1986) permits school administrators to restrict student expression that seems “vulgar and offensive in terms of public discourse” and that occurs when students are members in a captive audience. *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) allows administrators to restrict student speech when it is school-sponsored and as long as the administrator’s rationale for restricting the speech is “reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.” Last, *Morse v. Frederick* (2007) allows school administrators to suppress student speech that appears to promote illegal drug use. In addition, “truly threatening” student writing is not constitutionally protected. (*Watts v. United States*, 1969).

Know that restricting violent writing may undermine English teaching methods. Although administrators can restrict the content of student writing, it may not be educationally sound to do so. English teachers are taught in college that encouraging student creativity is an effective way to develop better writers. If public school administrators try to prevent this method of teaching altogether, they may be hurting the overall writing development of students.

Know current practices for teaching English and know how writing teachers create boundaries in writing assignments. It is vital for principals to know the practices of the teachers in their schools. Whitaker (2003) noted that the principal is key to ensuring that teachers accept responsibility for what goes on in their classrooms. By maintaining open communication and having a working knowledge of classroom practices, an administrator can



avoid being blindsided by a student's violent writing.

It can be helpful for administrators to collect documentation from all teachers, such as syllabi that are distributed to students. Such documentation helps administrators ensure that sound teaching practices are in place. In addition, something as simple as talking with each teacher individually about his or her goals can open the lines of communication that will foster a more productive working relationship when dealing with violent writing.

Listen carefully. When investigating violent writing, it is important that school administrators pay attention to what the student says about his or her writing, not just the writing itself. The administrator should also be prepared to listen to the teacher's rationale for making an assignment. He or she should also be willing to listen and possibly delay action to gather information from parents, other students, other teachers, and even law enforcement personnel.

Promote an atmosphere of honesty, respect, and care. The principal is key to establishing a school's climate and culture. Administrators can use student violent writing as a means of gathering information about the school in general. If school is a positive experience for students and reduces the isolation that many adolescents feel, the likelihood that they will create truly threatening writing declines. In addition, a school should promote responsible communication and teach students about the restrictions on their speech within the confines of the school.

Avoid zero-tolerance policies that institute automatic penalties. Although schools are mediums for promoting citizenship and responsible decision-making skills, they are also charged with protecting students' constitutional rights. Zero-tolerance policies hold the potential to overreach and suppress pure student speech. A zero-tolerance policy that is automatically enforced when a student creates a violent piece of writing does not permit investigation into whether the student actually poses a threat. In addition, the policy closes the door on a teachable moment about appropriate communication strategies.

Participate in threat assessment training and share that knowledge with your staff members. School administrators must keep students safe and must be prepared to respond to truly threatening students. Therefore, administrators must study how to handle threats and prepare a plan for the school's response that can be put into place efficiently when a threat arises.

Maintain specific and thorough documentation. At one point in my teaching career, my supervising principal told me, "If you don't document it, it's like it never happened." Although this may have been an exaggeration, administrators should go to great lengths to document each step they take when dealing with violent writing, such as taking statements from students and staff members and making copies of troublesome writing. Documentation should include the time, date, and setting of any dialogue dealing with student discipline. Not only will proper documentation make recalling events easier, but it also helps trace whether a student's behavior patterns have changed and whether disciplinary action was handled in compliance with school board policies.

Act in a timely fashion. In several of the incidents mentioned previously, the school administrators failed to act in a sensible, timely fashion. One administrator waited six days after receiving a piece of violent writing to suspend the student for being a threat. Certainly, it makes sense to remove any student who may be a threat from the school environment, even temporarily. But it is illogical for an administrator to allow a potentially threatening student to stay in school only to suspend the student days later for being a threat. Administrators must act swiftly, yet rationally.

Stay up-to-date on changes in education law. Administrators should be vigilant about studying student expression and how it influences the daily practice of the school. As technology offers students new ways to express themselves, administrators will be faced with unanticipated challenges. It is imperative that school administrators study education law, consult with school attorneys, and converse with their colleagues about the legal challenges facing schools.

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Conclusion

School administrators are integral to preventing tragedies in their schools, but that responsibility must be balanced against their responsibility to be guardians of the Constitution and the confines of student speech. To fulfill those seemingly conflicting duties, principals must learn about the writing that is occurring in their schools' classrooms, know current writing strategies, have a crisis plan in place for the school, and know the legal guidelines about free speech so that they can respond to student violent writing in a swift, fair, and constitutional manner. **PL**

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