

Every educational researcher, teacher, administrator and policymaker would do well to make this reading a priority. It is heartening to read so many voices—39 in fact—united in the struggle for justice. —*Peter McLaren, Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies, the Donna Ford Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University and author of Pedagogy of Insurrection*

Case Studies for Inclusive Educators & Leaders



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The Case of the Service Dog

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Introduction

This is a case of a father, Hal Anderson, who is advocating for his two sons, both of whom are diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. One son, Cody, is in Grade 3 and is very high functioning. The older son, Brody, is in Grade 4 and uses a service dog to provide safety, companionship, and independence. The service dog functions as an *assistive device* to aid him in daily life. Recognizing that Brody was going to attend Grade 5 at a new school in a year's time, the father called Taylor Rider, the principal of the Middle School Brody would be entering. The purpose of the call was to alert Mr. Rider to the fact that his son would be bringing with him his service dog, Charlie.

Mr. Anderson took the time to explain to Mr. Rider that Charlie was trained to respond to commands given by the caregiver or educator, and is necessary to keep him safe. The case also involves a Grade 5 student who has a severe allergy to dog dander. Questions then arise: What happens when the rights of two students collide? How does the Principal respond? Do the rights of one student supersede that of another? Is there a critical role for effective leadership? If so, what is it?

Overview/Analysis

The first day of the new school year arrived and Brody and Charlie were excited to be at Copper Town Middle School. It was also the day that the reality of having a service dog proved to be problematic. Annie, a Grade 5 student with a well-known allergy to dog dander, went into anaphylaxis. A teacher administered an epipen, and Mr. Rider took her to the local hospital. Annie's parents were very concerned about a dog being in school, especially given that they did not have prior knowledge of the arrival of a service animal.

After speaking to Annie's parents, Mr. Rider called Mr. Anderson. Mr. Rider explained to Mr. Anderson that due to the anaphylaxis reaction, Charlie was no longer welcome to attend Copper Town Middle School with Brody.

Mr. Anderson was quite frustrated. He was upset that the school had not taken the year to prepare a plan for the arrival of his child, and that the Principal was taking away independence and the possibility for success from Brody. He contacted the Autism Dog Service to see if he had any legal avenue to force the school to reconsider. A spokesperson directed him to research the Provincial Service Dog Act.

Mr. Anderson contacted Mr. Rider and asked for a meeting. During the meeting, Mr. Anderson explained the Service Dog Act to Mr. Rider. The school had to allow the dog and Brody to attend school together. Mr. Rider and Mr. Anderson talked, and came to an agreement that both felt could work for all involved. The dog and Brody would enter the school using a separate entrance, and the school would ensure that Annie and Brody were not in the same hall at the same time.

Mr. Rider spoke to the teachers about the plan. The teachers felt that Brody and Charlie should be kept to a single hallway to avoid causing any further anaphylaxis for Annie. The consequence of this plan was that Brody could no longer participate in Music, Art, or Physical Education classes, as they were not held in the wing that they planned to keep Brody and Charlie. Brody's homeroom teacher shared that she would like support in dealing with Charlie. As the administration had not created an entry plan or procedures for Charlie, she was left to command the dog,

feed him, and take him outside for bathroom breaks. The Principal said that he would look into finding a teacher assistant to support Brody and Charlie.

Upon hearing that Brody's education would become quite limited, Mr. Anderson contacted the Associate Superintendent of Student Services, Mrs. Susan Peptry. Mr. Anderson shared his story, and current concern of Brody not being able to participate in all classes. He maintained that both Brody and Charlie should have access to the whole school.

Mrs. Peptry also received a call from Annie's parents. They were quite frustrated with the whole situation. They felt that Mr. Rider was not doing enough to protect their child. Annie was experiencing increased symptoms due to her exposure to dog dander and regularly needed medical intervention to cope with the situation.

Mrs. Peptry called Mr. Rider to meet and to create an action plan. She was very concerned that the situation had escalated to this point without Mr. Rider bringing her into the loop. When the two met, Mrs. Peptry and Mr. Rider created a plan that they felt could work. There were three parts to the plan:

- The jurisdiction would upgrade the present school ventilation system to an HVAC filtration system.
- The school would move teachers' classrooms to avoid the two students coming into contact with each other.
- The parents would be asked to bring their children into the school in separate entrances from each other to avoid the cross mingling of child and dog dander.

Mrs. Peptry and Mr. Rider shared the plan with both sets of parents. All parties agreed that this was a good plan and compromise. The parents thanked Mrs. Peptry and Mr. Rider for their work. This plan worked for four weeks.

Winter hit Copper Town with a big snowfall. The separate entrances had not been cleared of snow in the morning when the kids were dropped off at school. Rather than have their students try to climb over large snow banks, each set of parents independently decided to have their child enter

school by the front door of the school, where the sidewalk had been cleared. This sharing of the front door of the school proceeded for a few weeks, as the parents did not feel that their children should have to walk farther to separate entrances than other children.

Mr. Rider soon began to hear from both sets of parents again. Annie's parents were frustrated that they were relying more and more on medical intervention to help her to be in school. Brody's father, Mr. Anderson, was frustrated that teachers were choosing to restrict Brody and Charlie's movements in the school. The consequence of the new restriction was that Brody could not attend his math or science class, and he was falling behind. This time, after hearing the parents, Mr. Rider chose to meet with the Superintendent, Ms. Arpena Babian. Ms. Babian decided that the next logical step would be to meet with both sets of parents, Mrs. Peptry, Mr. Rider, and the homeroom teachers, together to see if a solution could be found collaboratively. She also had a group come into the school to test the air quality to determine if the new HVAC system was purifying the air.

When the group met a few weeks later, Ms. Babian had carefully prepared an agenda. She decided to start by sharing the results of the air quality test.

"No allergens were found to be in the air of the school," she reported.

"So," she said, "really this seems to be an issue of how we share a learning space. How can we do this peacefully?"

Annie's parents were quite upset and felt that the dog was more accommodated than their child. They shared that they were not interested in compromising in a situation where "clearly a life should take precedent over a dog". They felt that Brody should be moved to another school in the district that already had a few service dogs.

Mr. Anderson was frustrated that the only solution presented was that his child be moved to another school. He shared that the Human Rights Tribunal may see things very differently. He also suggested that perhaps the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, national public broadcaster for radio and television) and the Minister of Education might be interested in the case.

Problem Statement

The rights of two children collide. Do the rights of one child supersede those of another? What should/could happen at this point?

Items for Consideration and Discussion

Examine this case from an Educational Leadership perspective. The following questions can be used to guide your discussion and thoughts. Feel free to introduce other issues that you feel speak to the leadership demonstrated in this case study.

1. Comment on the Principal's decision to remove the dog from the school after one day of school. Was this the best decision for the situation? Is it an indicator of how prepared he was to accept the service dog into the learning environment?
2. Should an allergy take precedence over a service dog? What supports exist to help a leader find the answer? Who do you involve in this decision?
3. Should the principal have involved district office staff earlier in the case? When should they be involved? What kinds of decisions should include jurisdictional staff?
4. Can this case be resolved in a manner that benefits both students? If so, how?
5. Was the year lead time provided by Mr. Anderson enough? What could the school have done to prepare for a service dog? Were they ready?

References

Autism in Education. (2011). *Service dogs and children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. Retrieved from Halifax, NS: http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/eecd_servdogsEn.pdf