

CASES ON (DIS)ABILITY

CASE 8.1: A "SURPRISE" FIRE DRILL

Ms. Stintson, a special education teacher at Centennial Elementary School, enjoyed working with her colleagues and helping them to understand the unique needs of her students. Her colleagues always seemed open to her ideas and appreciative of her work. Recently, though, she sensed a little frustration on the part of Ms. Foster, a first grade teacher, who recently received a new student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in her class. The student, a boy named Aiden, previously attended school in another state and brought his IEP, which addressed how best to meet his learning needs, with him to Centennial.

Aiden had been diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder but functioned well in a mainstream classroom. Ms. Foster seemed to think that many of the IEP objectives were unnecessary because Aiden was progressing just as well as his peers. She often expressed this sentiment with Ms. Stintson. Ms. Stintson, in turn, reminded her that she needed to continue adhering to the plan, but also mentioned that classroom teachers have an opportunity to share concerns during the upcoming annual review.

One Friday, before the school day began, the principal pulled Ms. Stintson aside and informed her that he would be administering a surprise fire drill later that morning. He asked her to take necessary measures to ensure that her students would not be negatively affected by the event.

One of the students Ms. Stintson immediately thought about was Aiden, whose parents had indicated that loud noises scared him so much they could disrupt his entire week. Although this concern was not yet indicated in his IEP, Aiden's parents had asked Ms. Stintson if she could notify Aiden about fire drills before they occurred and provide him with noise-reducing headphones.

Ms. Stintson stopped by Ms. Foster's classroom to share the plan with her. "I'll sneak in a minute or so before the alarm goes off to give Aiden the headphones," Ms. Stintson explained. "Then I will escort him out of the school with the rest of the class."

Ms. Foster expressed concerns about this arrangement. "It isn't a *surprise* fire drill if the students see you preparing Aiden for it," she complained. "These students are young. They're still learning the procedures to follow if there is a fire. The best thing we can do for *all* of them is to make the drill as authentic as possible." After a short pause, she continued: "Plus, if it's not mandated in Aiden's IEP, I don't think we should do it. You wouldn't be able to come in and give him headphones if it were a *real* fire."

Ms. Stintson had anticipated Ms. Foster's resistance and reminded her of the parents' request. She mentioned the potentially severe consequences for Aiden if he were taken by surprise and subjected unexpectedly to the noise and chaos of a fire drill. "I understand your desire to make it authentic," she explained, "but we can't knowingly subject Aiden to a harmful experience."

"I promise that I'll be discreet," Ms. Stintson continued. "It *is* in Aiden's best interest to remain with his classmates so he will be prepared if there is a real fire."

"Sorry," Ms. Foster responded curtly. "If you think headphones are necessary, then you'll need to take him out of my classroom well in advance of the drill so the other students don't suspect anything. That's my best compromise. I need to keep all my students' safety in mind."

Ms. Foster left the room before Ms. Stintson could respond.

Ms. Stintson sighed and glanced at the headphones she had carried into Ms. Foster's classroom. Her initial impulse was to notify the principal or Aiden's parents about Ms. Foster's unwillingness to help, but she worried about how that might affect Ms. Foster's relationship with Aiden. She certainly did not want Ms. Foster to resent having Aiden

in her class. However, she did want to find a constructive way to advocate for Aiden.

Questions

- 1 Do you agree with Ms. Stintson, who is concerned primarily about how a fire drill might traumatize Aiden, or with Ms. Foster, who worries that the accommodation will make the experience less authentic to him and the other students? Why? To what extent do the wishes of Aiden's parents inform your opinion?
- 2 What might you have recommended to Ms. Stintson and Ms. Foster as an alternative compromise, or is a compromise not an option in this case?
- 3 What options does Ms. Stintson have for advocating for Aiden in this situation? How would you advocate for him?

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CASE 8.2: INSUFFICIENT ACCOMMODATIONS

Ms. Thurston, a sixth grade science teacher, always believed in the power of experiential learning. Students didn't learn science by studying concepts out of a book, she thought, but by being scientists, using their senses and their reasoning skills to explore and apply scientific concepts.

One of Ms. Thurston's favorite activities, and one she arranged every year, involved taking her students to Meadow Creek Park, a nearby nature reserve, where they could walk the same trails and explore the same terrain as scientists from the university who studied local ecology. She was especially excited this year because the park had hired a new education director, Ms. Parsons, who had designed a 1-mile conservation hike specifically for middle school students, basing much of its content on sixth, seventh, and eighth grade state science standards. Ms. Thurston couldn't wait to take her students on that hike!

Two weeks before the field trip to Meadow Creek Park, a new student, Justin, was added to Ms. Thurston's fourth-period science

class. A cheery young man who was especially enthusiastic about science, Justin had cerebral palsy, a condition that required him to use crutches. At first Ms. Thurston was concerned about whether or not Justin would be able to participate in the field trip. He could navigate the classroom and school pretty easily. But because she never had *needed* to know, Ms. Thurston was not sure whether the learning center in the park was accessible. Certainly it met basic Americans with Disabilities Act standards with ramps, accessible parking, and wheelchair accessible bathrooms, but these were minimal standards.

Ms. Thurston decided to call Ms. Parsons and inquire about the accommodations offered for students like Justin. The last thing she wanted to do was to discourage his love of science with a negative experience, especially considering his newness at the school. Ms. Parsons tried to assure her by saying, "The hike might be a bit much for Justin, but we have alternative opportunities for students with physical disabilities and learning differences. He'll be fine."

When the bus pulled up to the Meadow Creek learning center, where the students were to check in and hear a short talk about being safe and respecting nature in the reserve, Ms. Parsons was there to greet them. Ms. Thurston was thrilled to see the expanded gardens wrapping around the south side of the building and the fairly smooth paths webbing through them. Perhaps Justin would be able to do some nature exploring after all, she thought.

As the students listened to their short lesson and asked their tour guides questions, Ms. Thurston talked with Ms. Parsons about how they would accommodate Justin. "Looks like he can spend some time in the garden," Ms. Thurston said, "exploring some of the region's native plants and flowers."

"Unfortunately," Ms. Parsons responded, "park rules don't allow for that." She pointed to a sign hanging above the door leading through the gardens and around to the hiking trails. It was labeled "General Rules of the Reserve." The third rule read: "For their own safety, visitors with conditions, injuries, or illnesses which may impair their mobility are not permitted on the nature paths or in the gardens. A selection of films about the park and local ecology are available for people who are unable to participate in the hikes due to these conditions."

Shocked, Ms. Thurston replied, "I thought you said you had accommodations. A film isn't an accommodation!"

Heading back toward the students, who were gathered at the south side exit, Ms. Thurston felt unsure. Should she use this as a teachable moment? What should she say to Justin, and how could she still make this a meaningful learning experience for him?

"The travails of experiential learning," she thought, wondering what to do next.

Questions

- 1 Ms. Thurston was frustrated to find that the learning "accommodation" for Justin consisted of sitting *inside* the center and watching a film while his classmates were on the hike. In your estimation, does this constitute an equitable accommodation? If not, what sorts of accommodations might have been more equitable?
- 2 Is it Ms. Thurston's responsibility to provide the hike experience to most of her students even if one student is excluded from any sort of parallel learning opportunity at the park? Should she look for a different learning opportunity that could include all of her students, even if she feels that opportunity may not generate the same level of enthusiasm for most of her student as hiking in Meadow Creek Park?
- 3 How, as she approaches her students after talking with Ms. Parsons, might Ms. Thurston use this situation as a teachable moment for *all* of her students? Can she do so without risking making Justin uncomfortable?
- 4 Now that the class is at the park, prepared to begin the hike while Justin watches a film, how might Ms. Thurston make the best of what she interprets as an inequitable situation?

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CASE 8.3: NUT ALLERGY

Katelyn, a second grader at Beachwood Elementary School, had a nut allergy that required extra precautions to ensure her safety while at school.

Katelyn's teacher, Mr. Hughes, was a veteran educator who willingly made accommodations in his class so that Katelyn never felt like she was missing out due to her allergy. Some of these accommodations included having all students wash their hands diligently before returning from lunch and making sure that they did not bring snacks from home into the classroom. He clearly communicated his "nut-free" policy to all of his students' families during the back-to-school meeting. He also sought training from the school nurse on how to use an epinephrine auto-injector, so that, if necessary, he could administer medication to Katelyn in order to prevent anaphylactic shock.

Mr. Hughes even included lessons and activities throughout the school year about the uniqueness of every child and how they can all learn from one another. He prided himself on being proactive rather than reactive when it came to meeting his students' needs.

At the beginning of the school year, Katelyn's mother, Ms. Thomas, asked Mr. Hughes if she could chaperone all of the class's field trips so she would be present if Katelyn experienced an allergic reaction. Mr. Hughes agreed, but also mentioned that parents and guardians typically attend only one field trip during the year so that other parents would have an opportunity to chaperone a trip as well. He forewarned her that other parents and guardians might complain about her chaperoning every trip, but said he would do his best to support her.

"Katelyn's safety is more important than people's misperceptions and resentments," Ms. Thomas, who was used to encountering resistance from people at the school, replied. Mr. Hughes appreciated her advocacy for her daughter.

When Mr. Hughes sent permission slips for field trips and requests for adult chaperones home, he was mindful to reduce the number of chaperones he needed by one in order to reserve a spot for Ms. Thomas. He received occasional complaints from parents and guardians about Ms. Thomas being permitted to attend each trip—certainly fewer than he had anticipated. He was always quick to point out how helpful it was to have Ms. Thomas on the trips so he could focus on the rest of the class.

Then he sent home permission slips and chaperone requests for the last field trip of the year: a visit to their state's capitol building. For

several weeks the students had been learning about the state government. They were excited to see their elected officials in action. The day he sent the permission slips home, Mr. Hughes learned that his class had been invited to watch their governor deliver a live press conference. They would even have time to ask her questions and take photos with her. Mr. Hughes and his students were thrilled.

Unfortunately, due to space and security restrictions imposed by the governor's office, only a handful of parents could chaperone. That evening, Mr. Hughes received several emails from interested parents and guardians asking if they could join the class on the field trip. Many expressed their desire to share the exciting moment with their children. Several mentioned how they ought to be allowed to join this field trip because they hadn't attended any of the others. Regretfully, Mr. Hughes had to deny most of the requests. He did promise, though, to take plenty of photographs and videos if he was allowed to do so.

The next day, as he was taking morning attendance, he noticed Katelyn looking unusually sad. "What's wrong, Katelyn?" he asked.

Katelyn responded that her classmates were being mean to her about their moms or dads not being allowed to attend the trip "because my mom *has to come*." Through a snuffle she continued, "They say it's not fair since she came on the other trips."

"It's just an excuse," Jennie, one of Katelyn's classmates, said. "We've never even seen you get sick from nuts."

Mr. Hughes was shocked, and decided to address this issue with the whole class. This prompted candid responses from his students, many of whom said their parents had been complaining at home.

Nathan shared, "My mom said she was going to talk to the principal about how you save spots for some parents and that's not fair."

Mr. Hughes glanced at Katelyn, who now had tears streaming down her face. *I'm not going to change my policy*, thought Mr. Hughes, *but I definitely need to do something differently*.

Questions

- 1 Were Mr. Hughes's accommodations for Katelyn, such as allowing her mother to chaperone every field trip, necessary or just considerate?

- 2 Mr. Hughes did not want to change his policy but did want to do a better job addressing the concerns shared by Katelyn's classmates and their parents and guardians. If he came to you for advice on what he might do differently, what would you suggest?
- 3 What policies exist in your class, school, or district, or in other districts, pertaining to nut allergies or other similar medical conditions? In your opinion, are these policies adequate? If not, what else could schools do to ensure the safety of students who are diagnosed with a food allergy?
- 4 Mr. Hughes was committed to maintaining an equitable and inclusive environment in his classroom. Given his students' comments about Katelyn and the fact that they might have been hearing negative things about Katelyn and her mother at home, how should he have addressed this situation with his students?

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CASES ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION

CASE 9.1: A NEW CLUB

Ms. Green, a history and civics teacher at Halloway High School, was a strong proponent of student efficacy. She only needed to utter the first half of her hallmark phrase, "If it's change you want . . .," before her students finished it for her: ". . . then it's change you must create." Many students who felt alienated or disconnected at Halloway gravitated toward Ms. Green and her classroom.

It was little surprise, then, when Lorraine, one of two "out" lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer-identifying (LGBQ) students at the school, asked Ms. Green if she would be willing to serve as the faculty sponsor for a Gay-Straight Alliance, or "GSA," a student organization for LGBQ students and their allies. Lorraine explained to Ms. Green how she and Jeff, the only other student at Halloway who was gay and "out," had decided, based partially on a lesson on civic engagement in Ms. Green's class, that they needed to create a student group that could be a "safe space" for LGBQ students. She shared that Terrence and Hu, two of their classmates who identified as heterosexual but also were moved by the same lesson, also wanted to help start the GSA. "We've already started talking about how to help educate our peers about homophobia," Lorraine explained. "We've even looked at what the GSAs at other schools are doing."

"Wow! Sounds like you've done your homework on this," Ms. Green replied, still listening intently.