

SAFETY, SUPERVISION, AND DISCIPLINE

Safety at WEDJ was taken seriously. We were committed to being thorough about ensuring the safety of over 500 people present daily on our premises. The responsibility for safety, supervision and discipline was split, at first, between Mr. Manahan, on the operations side, and me in terms of daily classroom management and student discipline.

When I first arrived at WEDJ, Mr. Carter and I discussed at length the extent of disciplinary consequences. I was not comfortable with the five-strike rule in place, sensing it was too complicated and possibly contributed to disciplinary problems reoccurring in the past. We agreed to a two-strike rule that would lead to a suspension for most infractions. We also removed items such as “not wearing all pieces of the official school uniform,” from the list of infractions. Breaking the rules had to be about potential harm to self or others. In our first year, the number of suspensions was more than cut in half. I believe clarity of consequences partly contributed to this transformation.

It was unfortunate when we had to recommend expulsion of an eighth-grade student to the Board. After a series of suspensions related to behavior, we had to consider recommending expulsion of this student, that we were unable to help. Even after his mother came and spent the day shadowing him in school, he was unable to make the transition to be a part of keeping WEDJ a safe and secure environment for all community members. The last straw came when he threatened a teacher and told a security staff member that he would beat him up. We made time to deliberate about the individual case, even though the policy read ‘after three suspensions a student would be recommended for expulsion.’ Sam’s mother (alias name) agreed that they would transfer him to another school, and we offered to do everything we could to help Sam assimilate into the new school culture. There were not enough Board members at this time to deliberate about the expulsion recommendation, so this transfer solution turned out to be in the best interest of Sam, and the community.

While we worked hard to anticipate problems, our record was not spotless. At the beginning of the school year Mr. Carter shared his ideas and experiences about how WEDJ could operate as a safe and secure school. Mr. Brooks, our facilities and security expert, also provided valuable guidance. We also were provided with a school nurse, contracted by the DC Department at Health. She took her lunch breaks from 1–2pm and when she was frequently absent, her superiors attempted to provide coverage. Unfortunately, it was rare for anyone to show up to provide nurse coverage, so Mr. Carter had to provide care for health-related issues on a regular

basis. I recall when Carter gave up a Friday night and all day Saturday, along with office staff members, Ms. Evans, and Ms. Morgan, to gain certification, in order to distribute authorized medicine to students. While I could rely on many people being generous with their time, WEDJ was so fortunate to have Mr. Carter leading the way. Whether Mr. Carter was covering classes, putting out fires, or being our *'nurse'* on call, he proved over and over again, what an asset he was to the school.

With two floors and over 400 students we needed to ensure we had a dedicated security plan. Mr. Sessoms, who had formerly acted as a Dean of Students in another school, stepped up to work with Mr. Carter to oversee how the facilities and security staff could enhance the current systems. Mr. Brooks and Mr. Sessoms had attended 'Active Shooter Training' sessions, and discovered among many findings, that we needed to be engaging as many adults as possible to help make our school safe.

There were two serious situations at WEDJ during our first year that were causes of considerable concern. During one recess a primary student fell and chipped his tooth. The teacher on duty did not observe the accident, so we were liable for the repair and future orthodontic surgery. I was disappointed that both teachers on duty simply didn't see the fall. This incident brought to our attention that staff members needed more playground supervision training. I asked the teachers involved to set up a committee to review and revise playground safety rules immediately, so they could communicate recommendations to all staff members at our next staff meeting. We also updated the Staff Handbook to ensure that there would be no gaps moving forward.

The second incident occurred when the same student was left on board the school bus at the end of the day. I recall earlier that same week Mr. Manahan had been speaking about increasing the number of busses, to increase enrollment and have a larger reach into the DC community. I shared my reservations about bussing at his operational meeting at that time. I explained that while the bus extends the school environment, it also expands the limits of our liability. While we had a qualified bus driver and a Teaching Assistant (TA) on hand to supervise the students, I was uneasy that a bus could be a prime location for problems of the bullying kind. Buses can be spaces where negative sub-cultures can exist, especially without trained adult supervision. When the bus driver's hands and eyes are on the road (where they should be), the bus must have another adult on board to ensure the safety of all students. While we had a trusted and respected staff member on board, that one evening, neither adult checked to see that all students had been dropped off at their designated locations. A grade 1 boy had fallen asleep and when the driver and the TA did not do a sweep of the bus at the end of the day, he was not discovered. It wasn't until his mother went to pick him up at the community center, where he was supposed to be dropped off, did we discover we had a missing child. When the mom came to the school, she discovered her boy still on the school bus. Mr. Manahan immediately removed the bus driver and TA from busing responsibilities, pending an investigation. Manahan, Carter and I met with the bus driver and the TA separately. We considered letting both employees go, but decided to let both remain at WEDJ.

The bus driver no longer was permitted to drive the bus, but continued in his role on the facilities and security team; the TA, who had been an incredible contributor to the school, no longer would be in a supervisory role on the bus. The TA recovered from this lapse of judgment and continued to make a tremendous contribution to the school. Later, the bus driver, following a series of altercations with his supervisor, chose to leave the school. As a result of this busing incident, the school had to out-source busing for additional costs and had to settle with the family out of court for upwards of \$25,000 for emotional damages. In addition to this settlement, the school had to pay premiums for legal advice. At this point we seriously discussed whether we would continue to offer busing services in the future. I was also concerned that staff members, who worked in the mornings on the bus or after school until 6 pm, did not receive adequate training or monitoring for the work they were doing with or without children present.

I was committed to making sure our students at WEDJ were safe. In my second year, Mr. Carter and Mr. Sessoms, with the help of technology coordinator, Mr. Gregorio, created a video to capture the attention of the staff, and communicate the seriousness of lockdown procedures. This was a good process for all to experience as we underwent an official lockdown in September 2013. After many DC schools were informed that the 'Navy Yard shooter' had not been arrested and might be loose in the Washington area. WEDJ was located in one of the city's highest crime areas. From January to August 2013, there were 34 crimes documented at the Rhode Island Metro, where many of our students and staff travelled daily. In my first year, I took the subway home every night and made sure I left in the daylight as the 15-minute walk to the Metro, involved walking through poorly lit areas and the back of a strip mall, where police had shared information about various arrests.

Life at WEDJ was not without its challenges, particularly when the school, in less than two years, experienced one tornado warning, two electrical brownouts, several flood warnings, multiple snow days, the lockdown precipitated from the Navy Yard shooting, in addition to DC's regular tormenting and disrupting spring storms. Trying to land an airplane at Reagan or Dulles in the spring pretty much sums up the uncertainty that needed to be factored in, when planning and operating outdoor events in any Washington, DC school. In addition to these real events, schools were required to conduct fire drills once a month, as well as practice lockdown and evacuation procedures. These events in the 180 days of schooling, in addition to numerous holidays, made it even more challenging to plan for a smooth succession of teaching. 'Learning interrupted' was the operative word when it came to piecing together an academic experience, peppered with a host of natural and man-made barriers.

We wanted to be prepared for the expected and unexpected, while clarifying and following through on consequences, so the safety of others would not be compromised. A safe school environment played a contributing role in ensuring that we had our bodies in our seats, safely ready for learning.