Pupil who had weapons in school gets 2d chance

By Brenda J. Buote, Globe Staff | March 11, 2007

[redacted] a soft-spoken student at Swampscott Middle School, missed classes for more than a month after making a foolish mistake. In January, just three days after the fatal stabbing of a freshman at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, [redacted] brought two martial arts "stars" and a box cutter to school.

"I thought they were cool, and wanted to show them to my friends," recalled [redacted], 14, of the star-shaped throwing knives. He said one of his older brothers had left the weapons behind in the family's Swampscott apartment when he moved out of state. "It was stupid. I put everything at risk: My education, my chances of graduating and going on to college, and my dream -- I want to be a graphic designer."

In an era of heightened school security, and with the Jan. 19 killing at Lincoln-Sudbury still capturing front-page headlines, Swampscott Middle School principal Ralph Watson took decisive action. After receiving an anonymous tip on Jan. 22 from a concerned parent, who told him that [redacted] was bringing weapons to school and showing them to other students, Watson called police and searched [redacted]s locker. [redacted] was expelled.

Only after meeting with the [redacted] family and conducting an extensive review of his school record was [redacted] given a second chance.

A Globe review of state Department of Education records reveals that Swampscott has a history of meting out stiff discipline. During the 2005-2006 school year, on 104 separate occasions, a student in a local school was discovered to have a knife or other cutting weapon.

In 96 instances, the infraction resulted in an out-of-school suspension. In only five cases was the student expelled -- among them, a youngster who attended Swampscott Middle School.

Across the Commonwealth, state education records show expulsion is usually triggered by a physical attack or fight, sexual harassment, a felony conviction outside of school, or possession of a handgun, drugs, or an explosive device.

"We take a hard line on student discipline regarding any sort of incident that could harm any other child," said Swampscott Superintendent Matthew H. Malone. "The safety and security of our students is our number one priority."

When [redacted] slipped the weapons into his backpack on Jan. 19 and brought them to a school dance, he knew what he was doing was wrong, but he didn't grasp the gravity of the situation until it was too late. His parents were called to the school to get him and he was charged with two counts of possession with a dangerous weapon. Only then, when he saw the anger and shame in his father's eyes, did [redacted] finally understand.

Over the past six weeks, the [redacted] family has had to hire a lawyer to appeal the expulsion and represent [redacted] in Lynn Juvenile Court. The experience offered a civics lesson the seventh-grader won't soon forget. In both the school and court proceedings, he begged for a second chance.

After reviewing [redacted]s case and school records -- in a progress report, [redacted] is described by one of his teachers as "a pleasure to have in class" and has had no history of disciplinary problems -- the district attorney agreed to a four-month continuance. On July 15, if [redacted] has stayed out of trouble, both charges against him will be dismissed, said [redacted]s lawyer, William J. Barabino of Wakefield. [redacted] returned to class on March 5.

Malone decided to hold the expulsion "in abeyance" if [redacted] complies with certain conditions as outlined in a letter dated Feb. 28 and obtained from the [redacted] family. [redacted] returned to school Monday, after agreeing to make up all of the homework assignments he missed during his absence, meet with a counselor, obey all school rules, and subject himself to random searches by Watson or the assistant principal at the middle school.

"In the event that [redacted] does not comply with the conditions as enumerated below, to the letter, his expulsion will be taken out of abeyance and he will be expelled immediately thereafter," Malone wrote in the letter to [redacted]s father.

Reached in his office early last week, Malone said he could not discuss the details of [redacted]s case, citing student confidentiality laws. However, he was quick to note: "It's always important to remain fair, and to ensure that the consequences fit the crime. Every case is different and should be weighed on its own merits, based on the facts and using the disciplinary process to come to a fair and just decision."

In an interview on Jan. 23, the day after the weapons were discovered in [redacted]s locker, Watson said he did not believe [redacted] intended to harm anyone when he brought them to school, that he merely wanted to show off to his friends. Watson called it a "poor choice."

"I'm relieved," said [redacted] who while banned from class spent at least an hour a day completing missed schoolwork under his father's watchful eye. "Finally, I am able to go back to school. I'm very grateful to have this second chance."

[redacted]s dad, Po [redacted] said he would do whatever he could to ensure that [redacted] does what is required to remain in school. Po [redacted] a farmer from a village in Cambodia, escaped the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge with his wife, [redacted] and their children two decades ago. They lived in Thailand, the Philippines, and Canada before settling in Lynn in 1985. The family moved to Swampscott last year because they wanted better -- and safer -- schools for their children.

[redacted] 69 and retired, for years worked long hours in a local restaurant to support his growing family in hopes of giving his children a chance to realize the "American Dream" and make a better life for themselves.

On Monday, Po [redacted] drove his son to school. Usually, [redacted] walks the few short blocks to class with his nieces, but his father wanted to be sure his youngest child returned to class in high spirits.

"It was a special day, the first day back," said Susan [redacted] 37, [redacted]s sister, speaking for the family since her parents do not speak English. "My dad is 100 percent sure [redacted] is going to stay on track. After all that we went through, and from everything [redacted] has said and done, I think he has learned a lot."

Malone said the incident also has provided a valuable lesson for students, staff, and parents by showing the system does work when given the chance.

"In this day and age, we must deal with issues not thought possible in Swampscott years ago," Malone said. "I can be proud of the people in this town -- the students and the parents -- for communicating with the schools, and proud of school officials for handling this situation appropriately."

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