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WESTCHESTER

In Schools, How Tight Must Discipline Be?

By JOSEPH BERGER

ARDSLEY

HOW far should a school go in disciplining an unruly student? And what responsibility do parents bear for that youngster's behavior?

These are issues that American educators and parents perpetually wrestle with, and they have been debated around Westchester recently because of two incidents that have received attention not just in coffee shop chitchat but also in the news media.

In early June, a trustee of Ardsley's school board resigned after other middle school parents expressed outrage at her 14-year-old son's behavior. They accused him of bullying children and repeatedly threatening violence, including a massacre and bombing, and blamed the school for not stepping in sooner and more firmly. School officials, the parents contended, had been too tolerant of the boy's belligerence because of his mother's board position.

In the other incident, David Turano, 18, a senior at Briarcliff High School, hiked up his gown and flashed his naked backside to a graduation audience in late June. Embarrassed officials called the police, who charged the boy with exposing himself.

Parents and school officials are not always wise in such situations. More commonly, they agonize and improvise, trying to draw fine lines between offensive behavior and the natural need of teenagers to define themselves by testing limits.

In the mooning case, some people said they thought that Mr. Turano's actions spoiled what was a joyous or solemn moment for students who had labored for their diplomas and parents who had struggled to steer their children to that moment and wanted to pause for some well-deserved elation or tears.

Nevertheless, Mr. Turano's lawyer, Michael Santangelo, argued that what his client had done was "a prank that doesn't belong in the criminal justice system." It did not portend a life of

crime that required police intervention, Mr. Santangelo said. Mr. Turano pleaded not guilty and is scheduled for a hearing in Mount Pleasant court on July 24, in a proceeding that typically results in a community service sentence.

Asked about news reports that Mr. Turano's mother had defended his stunt by referring to what she said was the school's unfair treatment of him over many years, Mr. Santangelo said: "Parents do a lot to take the focus off their son or daughter. But she takes it seriously."

And the high school has moved on. James Kaishian, the principal, initially withheld Mr. Turano's diploma but said later that he would receive it.

In the Ardsley case, many parents said they thought the response by the 14-year-old boy's mother and school officials was too timid by half. Maryanne Reda, a parent of two middle-schoolers who volunteers as a cafeteria monitor, recalled how she once saw an aide accuse the boy of stealing and heard him call the aide something unprintable. When a teacher ordered the boy to the office, he called her a Nazi, Mrs. Reda said.

Anne Polsky, a rheumatologist, complained to other parents that her special-needs son had been repeatedly tormented, though in an interview she said it was wrong just to blame a single student. "When there's a sense discipline is lax, then people are allowed to say things that they might have regarded as inappropriate," she said.

Incidents like these resulted in four suspensions for the 14-year-old, but only one day for each offense, parents said.

Mrs. Reda said it seemed to her that the boy received special treatment because his mother was on the school board and the principal was new. "The child's behavior was quite disruptive, but it appeared there were no consequences," she said.

In March, 15 parents met with Jason Friedman, the district's interim superintendent, to discuss their concerns about the boy's behavior, but little was done, Mrs. Reda said. Not long afterward, classmates said they had heard the boy, speaking of an ex-girlfriend, saying that he would "drown her in a pool of weeds" because she had broken off their relationship. Mrs. Reda said she had confirmed the story with the girl's mother.

On June 2, Chief John A. Kapica of the Greenburgh police received a complaint that the boy told a teacher "my parents wouldn't be mad at me if I massacred the whole school." The next day school officials were told of a Web posting with the title "the plot-to-bomb-ardsley," which carried a soundless video of the boy. After discussions with the police about the posting, the

school was evacuated.

Officials then held conversations with the mother, Stephanie Marquesano, and it was decided that the boy be home-schooled for the remaining two weeks of the year. Mrs. Marquesano later resigned from the school board.

She declined to be interviewed, but it seems clear how painful it must have been for her to see so much anger directed at her son. Nevertheless, she did not apologize.

“Please remember,” she said in a resignation statement, “relying on rumors, distortions, half-truths or gossip, taking things out of context and using them as fact may be acceptable on a reality show, but we are a flesh and blood family living in this community. Just as important, not everything is always as it appears. No one is perfect, each of us has his differences, his flaws, his strengths and his weaknesses.”

The school board issued a simultaneous statement that her decision “is purely voluntary and not based on any violation of any provision of the law, neglect of duty or willfully disobeying any decision, order or policy.”

But some experts say a halting response by officials constitutes a neglect of duty by itself. Jonathan Cohen, president of the Manhattan-based Center for Social and Emotional Education, which promotes a safe school environment, said that educators forget that they are “ethical as well as intellectual teachers” and that schools must work out with students a code of appropriate conduct that teachers can use for “teachable moments.”

Debi Fishman, a social worker whose son attends the Ardsley school, expressed a similar view. “I’m afraid,” she said, “that by the school’s lack of an appropriate consideration to the consequences of this behavior, it got to this point.”

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