



## Sophomoric Skipping: Determining Fair Consequences

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“Do you have a moment?” Hannah Miller poked her head through the half-open door to Assistant Principal Tim Rollins’ office.

She knew that Tim didn’t really have any time to spare. He was sorting through the same fallout that had led her to seek his counsel. Three sophomore boys had taken part in what had become a rite of passage at small-town, middle-class Wingrave High School: “Sophomore Skip.” On Sophomore Skip Day at Wingrave, newly-licensed sixteen-year-olds and their friends go for a joyride during school hours—at least, those with access to cars do. Due to truancy laws, attendance norms, and the hidden class differences the practice highlighted, the school had always formally opposed Sophomore Skip, but had typically allocated its limited enforcement energies elsewhere so long as skipping didn’t affect academics.

In the past year, however, the tradition had become more problematic. Larger groups of students were spending more time off campus, and not just on one day. Moreover, there had been a series of near accidents due to reckless driving, as well as a crash that paralyzed a teen in a neighboring district. Though unrelated to Sophomore Skip, the crash had rattled the Wingrave community and brought safety (and liability) concerns to the fore.

For all those reasons, the administration had vowed to eliminate Sophomore Skip at the beginning of that academic year, promising to issue harsh punishments to any student caught skipping school, on Sophomore Skip Day or otherwise. Tim had written a letter to families outlining the expectations and punishments for unexcused absences and leaving campus without permission:

- a day of in-school suspension,
- an automatic month-long loss of off-campus privileges,
- and no making up any missed assignments.

While there was some consternation among parents and students about these provisions, especially the provision limiting make-up work, most of the feedback Tim got was positive. The broader community, it seemed, was sick of Sophomore Skip, too.

It didn’t take long for students to test the administration’s new policy. After a blizzard resulted in three snow days, three sophomore boys who evidently weren’t ready to return to school decided to spend the morning driving around. The story unfolded like a joke: The boys went to Dunkin’ Donuts in the morning and sped out of the parking lot as they were leaving, just as a police car was entering. The officers flipped on their lights, turned around, and pulled over the boys. The cops knew about the Sophomore Skip crackdown; when they realized the boys were sophomores, they made all of the boys get out of the car while they ran a background check on the driver. A few seniors who happened to be there at the same time (with permission to be off-campus) recorded the whole incident and quickly posted the video on Snapchat, with all three sophomores clearly visible—and clearly very nervous—under the police car’s flashing lights. Within minutes, the entire student body was laughing about the video before any adults knew what was happening.

In general, Hannah supported the administration's decision to get tough on Sophomore Skip. In her four years at Wingrave, she'd grown frustrated with the school's allowing its most privileged students—the ones who already had a car at sixteen!—to flout school rules with virtual impunity. Nevertheless, as the teacher of one of those three boys, she was worried about the severity of his punishment, especially in light of the deep embarrassment she knew the Snapchat story had already caused him. While she expected Tim would be slow to change the new policy after its first real test, he had helped her navigate complicated situations in the past, so she hoped he'd be open to helping her with this issue, too.

Hannah started carefully. "Suppose a student misses the largest assessment of the semester with an unexcused absence. What would be the school policy in that case, and what is the leeway?"

Tim answered: "The policy is that the student gets an automatic zero. Why do you ask?"

"I'm worried about Rocco. He missed the biggest project of the quarter, and he's looking at the real possibility of not passing my class because of it."

"Hasn't he known about the assignment for weeks?" Tim asked.

"It's complicated." Hannah replied, letting out a deep sigh. "We were supposed to have two in-class workdays on Monday and Tuesday and then everyone would present on Wednesday. But the snow days fell on those exact three days, which messed everything up. The quarter ended that Friday, so I needed to get those presentations finished. I decided to email my class that, do or die, the presentations were happening Thursday."

Hannah took a breath and continued. "After the last storm, we established a norm that students check email on snow days, and it seemed like – other than Rocco – everyone did and was ready."

Tim's face scrunched up as Hannah continued. "I talked with Rocco, and he apologized profusely. He told me that he thought it was a workday and he never would have skipped if he had known he had a presentation. I want to believe him. And it does make sense that he expected we'd be working in class on Thursday to prepare for presenting on Friday."

Hannah paused, then asked: "Did the other boys miss big-ticket work?"

"Not that I've heard of," Tim responded. "They're knuckleheads, but they seem to have been smart about when they skipped."

"Yeah, that's why this feels kind of wrong," Hannah ventured. "Rocco does the same stupid thing as they did. But they only get in-school suspension, while he gets that plus the huge consequence of failing Bio for the quarter and maybe the semester. I don't know, though," she sighed in exasperation. "Should I even be concerned about the comparison, or about the effects? Neither the zero nor making it up feels fair."

Tim looked at the clock. "Listen, Hannah, you know we're taking Sophomore Skip seriously. I respect your judgment, but I'm going to need to be convinced that we need to make an exception here. One of the key recommendations from our Diversity & Inclusion Committee report last year was that we stop Sophomore Skip. Faculty and parents agreed that this particular tradition provides a really problematic platform for our more privileged students to flaunt their wealth and erodes our school culture."

"You definitely don't need to convince me of that, Tim."

"We have meetings set up today with all three families. I'm meeting with the Johnsons last. If you send me an email in the next hour with how you want to handle this, I'll listen."

Hannah shuddered. The Johnsons were Rocco's family, and they could be strict; while the school policy was harsh, Mrs. Johnson would probably make Rocco's life ten times more miserable with her own consequences.

"Two more things before you leave." Tim added. "First, practically, if you let him make it up, what would that look like? How would it be academically legitimate and also fair to you and your time? Many make-up assignments are bunk; that hurts your credibility. You could do some sort of partial credit that might enable him to still pass the quarter, but you're also not obligated to create extra work for yourself here, especially with the end-of-the-quarter workload. I remember being a judge at your presentations last year; I admired how the students were graded not just on their presentation itself but also their ability to answer questions on their feet and ask good questions of one another. I don't see how you could replicate that for Rocco. Second, remember that between the Snapchat video and Rocco's obvious absence from presenting, the kids will know what you do, regardless of how careful we are about privacy. Think about the message you'll send if you make an exception for Rocco."

Hannah hadn't really considered either factor. As Rocco's teacher, she had been focused on his development, ensuring that he faced consequences in line with the gravity of his offense. But Tim was right that she needed to think about how her actions would impact all of Wingrave's students, and herself.

Still pondering her options, Hannah decided to consult with Marge, a veteran teacher who had served as her mentor since she joined the faculty four years ago. Hannah appreciated Marge's careful listening and probing questions.

As Hannah pulled up to Marge's classroom, she saw that Marge was eating lunch with Elizabeth, a physics teacher who had been around Wingrave nearly as long as Marge had. In Hannah's experience, Elizabeth was more of a talker than a listener, but with less than an hour to make her decision, Hannah opted to explain her predicament to both teachers, rather than waiting to catch Marge alone.

After Hannah had given them the rundown, Elizabeth spoke first. "If you ask me, this boy made a choice, and that choice has consequences. I mean, do you really think he didn't know about the rescheduled presentation?"

"What would happen if you did give him a zero?" Marge asked gently.

Hannah thought for a second before speaking. "He's a typical sophomore boy: currently immature, but slowly figuring it out. He's a good kid, but his transcript is average at best. The zero will pull his grade down to the low fifties."

She continued. "I've worked really hard with him this year, and he's grown a ton in terms of doing the work of being a good student, despite his recent misbehavior. Given the weight of this particular assignment, it'll be hard for him to recover his grade. I'm worried he won't have any incentive to try for the rest of the semester if he knows he will probably finish with an F regardless. I don't know...maybe he could pull out a D, maybe even a D+ if he aces everything else."

Marge nodded knowingly. "I had Rocco last year, so I know his freshman year grades were a bit...well, they could have been higher. Given that, getting a D is going to make it hard for him to recover to a 3.0, even by graduation."

The 3.0 was the magic number in their state. A 3.0 grade point average was required for admission to a number of state schools and served as the cut-off for all sorts of scholarships. Although graduating with a lower GPA didn't totally sink your chances for admission to a four-year college, it made things a lot harder, especially for low-income students who would need significant financial aid.

Although Rocco's family wasn't low-income, Hannah knew that they would struggle to afford paying for college, especially as he had at least one older sibling who would be in college for part of the same time. It's worth remembering, she thought to herself, not all of the kids who decided to skip school in the passenger seats of their friends' cars were fabulously wealthy.

Hannah felt validated at Marge's words. "Getting a zero would be a huge punishment! Plus, Rocco's actually pretty good at science, and he's growing out of his irresponsibility. His grade won't reflect his ability at all. And, it isn't just about the grade—if Rocco stops trying in bio because it doesn't matter, he's not going to learn any new material. That could affect his ability to be successful in future science classes. Isn't teaching science my main job?"

Elizabeth interjected. "If I were a student, I know I would find him getting a make-up unfair! Tim only just announced the new policy regarding Sophomore Skip, and we're already considering ignoring it? Especially in light of all of our conversations during our faculty meetings this past year about equity and inclusion, that just doesn't sit right with me."

Elizabeth continued, gathering steam. "And this also isn't fair to students who have had to suffer the consequences of their actions! In my classes, an assignment that's turned in even a minute late loses 1/3 of a grade and will continue to lose 1/3 of a grade every four hours until the thing is turned in. After a full day, what would have been an A paper turns into a C paper. By the end of the second day, the paper is an F – which has happened before! I know I have a reputation for being tough, but I also have a reputation for holding my students to high standards, and for treating all kids equally. That's the Wingrave Way, right?"

Elizabeth was making sense, but Hannah still felt uncomfortable with a zero and tried to puzzle it out. "You're right that making an exception for Rocco may undermine the policy in the eyes of other students. But in some ways, enforcing the policy isn't fair to Rocco. Part of it is that it's an academic consequence for a non-academic violation. Anybody can see this choice forever because it will become part of his transcript, but his mistake wasn't, say, cheating. It was outside the classroom."

"If Rocco does fail, could he make up the missing credit in summer school?" Marge asked. "That might solve the problem of him failing."

Hannah turned to Marge. "I'm not sure. I'll have to ask. The credit recovery classes can fill up really quickly."

Marge spoke as the bell rang to signal the end of lunch. "I don't disagree that Rocco and the other boys acted poorly. And I've hated Sophomore Skip for as long as I can remember. But we can't forget that these are kids. Hannah, I don't exactly know how to balance being tough and being fair here. I'm a little less sympathetic to Rocco's story about not knowing he was going to miss his presentation. In fact, if I were more conspiratorial, I'd even worry that he was hoping to earn himself more time to prepare. At the same, I'm not so sure a zero will teach him all that much. I'm afraid I don't have great advice for you here."

The three teachers started to pick up their things, getting ready for the next period. As they made their way to the door, Elizabeth chimed in again. "I get that there are extenuating circumstances here, and I get the worry that a 0 may not teach Rocco the crisp lesson we might hope he learns. All that said, I know what bending the rules here will teach all our other students and right away, too, given how quickly word travels in this connected world of ours. If you let Rocco out of this, students will doubt how seriously we take our own policies, which only hurts us as we try to get rid of this entitled, dangerous 'Sophomore Skip' nonsense."

The teachers parted ways, and Hannah returned to her classroom, still unclear about the fairest path forward. Should she give Rocco a zero? Or should she allow some sort of make-up? If she chose the latter, what should it look like, and how much should it “fix” Rocco’s grade?

The seconds ticked away, but Hannah still didn’t know what to do. She did know, however, that Tim needed an answer soon. Still uneasy, Hannah opened her laptop and began to write...