



**Underqualified and Overwhelmed:
Accommodating a Student with Special Needs in a Student-Run After School Program**

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“Believe me, I’ll make sure Michael knows that kind of behavior is not acceptable at after school. Thanks so much for giving me a call – I’m so sorry for his behavior.”

“Thank you, Ms. Harrison, and absolutely no need to apologize – it’s just our policy to suspend any student whose behavior might harm others.” Carly, a director of Lincoln Village After School Program (LVASP), had just delivered the news to Ms. Harrison that her 7-year-old son, Michael, would be suspended for two days from after school given his behavior in the classroom earlier that afternoon.

At first, Michael seemed to be having a pretty good day: although he screamed when he entered the room and swore at another student, he listened to the classroom leader’s directions to sit down with his “buddy,” a college-aged volunteer who worked 1:1 with Michael each day. However, things took a turn for the worse when his buddy instructed him to take out his homework. Michael stormed out of the room, and when his buddy followed him, Michael threw a sharpened pencil at his face. Luckily, Michael’s buddy wasn’t hurt, but this behavior was grounds for Michael to go “walk and talk” – the staff had decided to try using supervised walks as a behavior management strategy when Michael began to act violently.

Michael began to cry when Carly and his buddy told him they’d be leaving the classroom. After a few minutes of inconsolable sobbing, Michael started banging his head hard against the wall. When Carly attempted to put space between him and the wall, hoping to keep Michael from hurting himself, Michael ran over to a large metal bookshelf and shoved it down, nearly hitting students who had been doing homework on the rug. It was at this point that Carly decided Michael’s behavior warranted suspension.

“I understand,” Ms. Harrison said. “It’s just been so frustrating. I feel like he’s suspended almost every week, and he’s suspended all the time from school, too.” Ms. Harrison wasn’t wrong – Michael seemed to have outbursts of extreme and violent behavior on a daily basis in after school. Last week, he’d been sent home early for taking off his pants and running half-naked around the classroom. The week before, he had been suspended for getting into a fistfight with another student.

Ms. Harrison continued: “I’ve been trying everything I can to help Michael and I just don’t know what to do. His therapist suggested that I take him to a clinic at the hospital, and they called me last week to tell me they think he has PTSD. It’s probably from the violence we saw when we lived in the shelter a few months ago. I told the school and they said that they’re going to have a new IEP meeting anyway because of all his suspensions.¹ But who knows what will come of it – I had to fight them just to get him weekly therapy and his smaller class. I just wish someone could tell me what I should be doing when he acts out like this.” Ms. Harrison sighed. “In any case, I am just so glad that he is able to go to after

¹ Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), schools must review the IEP of any student with disabilities who has been suspended for more than 10 days in a school year. This “manifestation determination” determines whether the student’s suspensions were connected to his or her disability or the school’s failure to implement the IEP. If so, the IEP is modified and the student may be moved to a new educational placement (Massachusetts Department of Education. “Discipline of Special Education Students Under IDEA 2004.” http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/IDEA2004/spr_meetings/disc_chart.pdf. Accessed 06 July 2018.).

school. Thank goodness I finally heard about LVASP after all those months searching for an after school program I could afford. You all have been a huge support for him this year.”

Carly hesitated. This wasn’t the first time Ms. Harrison had told Carly how much she appreciated all the support that LVASP gave to Michael, but Carly was skeptical that LVASP actually *did* provide him the support he needed. In fact, she often worried that she and other staff members were actually *harming* Michael given their inexperience and lack of training for working with students with special needs.

Carly, like all of the other LVASP staff members, were volunteer college students who organized and ran the free after school program for those living in a public housing community. Carly believed that the staff’s lack of teaching expertise was mostly a non-issue: as long as staff loved kids and were somewhat versed in basic behavior management, they were able to fulfill the program’s mission to provide students with a safe and structured place to do homework and play games after school. In Michael’s case, however, she felt like she and others were wholly unqualified to address his extreme behaviors. They had very little training on how to work with young people, let alone those with special needs: the program could only afford to have a teacher or youth worker come in to lead a few hour-long professional development sessions every year. She and others had tried to do some research on her own to come up with individualized interventions for Michael, like the “walk and talks,” but she wasn’t sure they did any good. Now that Ms. Harrison had shared that Michael was struggling with trauma-induced mental illness, she felt even less certain that LVASP was the type of supportive program Michael needed.

“I appreciate that, Ms. Harrison. I do have to go, but I look forward to seeing Michael in a couple of days.”

“Alright. I’m sure he looks forward to that too. I know he yells and screams at you all when he’s upset, but at home he can’t stop talking about how much fun he has at after school. Have a nice night, Carly.”

“You too, Ms. Harrison.”

Carly hung up, feeling on the verge of tears. She loved Michael and Ms. Harrison, and was so glad that both of them felt like LVASP was a supportive and fun environment. She wanted to be able to provide the supports that Michael needed, but after almost a year of working with him, she was feeling more and more like LVASP’s amateur educators were not equipped to work with a student with such extreme behaviors and special needs.

She cleaned up the classroom and walked out to her car, where her two co-directors, Emilio and Desiree, were waiting to drive back to campus. She had warned them earlier she might be late tonight since she had to call Ms. Harrison about Michael’s suspension.

“How did it go?” asked Emilio.

“I don’t know. It was fine, I guess. Ms. Harrison was understanding about why Michael was suspended, as usual. But then she started to talk about how supportive our program is for Michael, and I just don’t know if that’s really the case,” Carly sighed.

“*Of course* she feels that way,” Desiree offered. “I went to the same elementary school as Michael, and that place is the worst. I wouldn’t be surprised if Michael just ran around screaming all day because they don’t have the desire or manpower to work with him. We give him one on one attention, we’re a free place for him to go after school, and we spend a lot of time trying to come up with strategies to help him self-regulate. That’s more than most spaces can say.”

“Sure,” Clara said. “But what if we’re doing more harm than good? We keep having to suspend him – we simply have no other way of trying to deal with his violent behavior. But I read an article the other day

about how suspending students can increase a student's distress and misbehavior.² I just don't know if we're qualified enough to work with Michael without accidentally doing harm. Honestly, sometimes I don't know if we should continue to have him in our program."

"I agree. We also need to think more about how Michael's behavior affects the other students in the class," Emilio added. "It seems like almost every day, Michael either hurts or tries to hurt another student. Like today, with the bookshelf incident: if that had hit another student as it fell, they could've been concussed - or worse. And Michael's behavior doesn't just pose a physical threat to the students. He calls them names, insults them, you name it. Sometimes when Michael's in the classroom, I feel like we're getting further and further from our goal to provide the other 15 students in the classroom with a safe place to go after school."

"I get it," Desiree said. "But if Michael doesn't go to after school here, he's not going to go to after school *anywhere*. We're the only free after school program in the neighborhood, and his mom has told us before she can't afford even the subsidized programs around here. Those programs are running on a shoestring, anyway, and I don't know that they are much more qualified than we are. In an ideal world, Michael would be going to a therapeutic after school with lots of mental health professionals, but we don't live in an ideal world."

"That's certainly true!" Carly affirmed, shaking her head. "I wonder if taking this consistent space away from Michael might be bad for him, too, even if there *was* another after school program that their family could afford."

"But you have to think about the other kids," Emilio responded, his frustration mounting. "And what about liability? I know we're not required to provide the special education services he receives at school, and there's no question that as college students we aren't qualified to even try.³ But what if he ends up seriously hurting himself or someone else while he's with us? That almost happened today. You know how violent he can get even when we're giving him a ton of attention and supervision. It be heartbreaking for a child to be seriously injured—and I don't know what would happen to LVASP. We could be shut down."

"Sure, but being sued for discrimination would jeopardize this program's future, too," Desiree countered. "Kicking Michael out because of his special needs might not be legal, at least not until we run out of reasonable ways to accommodate his needs.⁴ Can't we keep trying to find other approaches to working with him? There's no way we've exhausted all of the resources available. Maybe we just haven't found the strategy that will work best to help him behave positively."

"We've tried so much," Emilio responded. "Sticker charts, emotional regulation strategies, positive reinforcement, walk and talks, time outs, a 1:1 buddy, special privileges if he behaves...the list goes on. And don't think the other students haven't noticed: Neveah came up to me at snack today and asked

² Committee on School Health. "Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion." *Pediatrics*, vol. 112, no. 5, 2003, pp. 1206-1209.

³ After school programs that do not receive public funds are not subject to IDEA, and therefore are not legally required to adhere to a student's IEP (New Jersey Department of Human Services. "Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in After School and Summer Programs: A Guide for Families and Professionals." http://www.spanadvocacy.org/sites/default/files/files/Afterschool_Inclusion_FAQs.pdf. Accessed 02 May 2018).

⁴ After school programs, like all public spaces, are subject to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities (New Jersey Department of Human Services. "Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in After School and Summer Programs: A Guide for Families and Professionals." http://www.spanadvocacy.org/sites/default/files/files/Afterschool_Inclusion_FAQs.pdf. Accessed 02 May 2018).

why she can't have a special buddy like Michael. And last week, James got suspended for throwing his folder across the room, but today Michael didn't have that same consequence when he threw a pencil. It's not fair to the other students that we give Michael so much attention and special treatment. I am glad that we've been trying to support him, but it's clear that nothing we're trying is working for him. And now our efforts are having a negative effect on the rest of the classroom."

"It's worth mentioning, too, that none of Michael's teachers or therapists or family members have found a strategy that seems to consistently work with him, either. When we've called them, they've suggested all the same things we've tried," Carly added.

"But then that shows that we're supporting Michael just as well as everyone else," Desiree said. "In that case, removing Michael from after school would just create a situation where he sits at home and does nothing when he could be at after school reading or socializing with his peers."

Carly was torn. On the one hand, she agreed with Desiree: she wasn't sure there were any better after school options for Michael. Besides, who were they to make a decision about what was best for Michael? He and his mother seemed to believe LVASP was a supportive and positive place for him to be. On the other hand, she felt like the staff's inexperience could be doing harm, and Emilio made a good point that the staff's focus on Michael was detracting from the needs of other students and could pose serious liability issues down the road. What should they do?