

2. The Trajectory of A Kitchen Knife

Chicago Academy (CA) is a public charter school that provides students with an alternative means of free, quality education. In contrast to other schools in the area, CA is a smaller school, where the students receive one-on-one attention and usually perform well. Although crime in the neighborhood is relatively high and there is a significant amount of gang activity, the school manages to foster a safe, productive learning environment. One of the reasons is because CA has a zero tolerance policy on drugs and weapons. This means that if a student is found with either, they are immediately up for expulsion.

Carl, an 8th grader, and his brother Kenny, a 7th grader, attend CA. They have been victims of harassment by members of a neighborhood gang on the way to and from school on several occasions. These neighborhood gang members do not attend CA.

The previous week, Kenny was jumped by several individuals from the gang on his way home from school. Carl made an attempt to defend his younger brother, but they both ended up with injuries that led to a hospital visit. They also missed several days of school.

The following week, when Kenny and Carl returned to school, Carl spoke to one of his teachers, Ms. M, about the incident. He also told her that it would never happen again. But he could not specify how he was going to prevent another incident from occurring. The next day, another student came in after class to talk to Ms. M. He explained that when Carl raised his hand to answer a question in class, he had seen a kitchen knife tucked into the back pocket of Carl's pants.

Ms. M is aware of the zero tolerance policy. If what the other student says is true and is reported to security, she knows it will result in Carl's expulsion. She also knows that if this happens, he will be placed in the neighborhood public school. That school is the one most regularly in the news and has a reputation for its violence. As far as she knows, at least a few the gang members Carl has had problems with, attend that school. If Carl ends up attending that school, the trajectory of his life will likely take a different turn. Ms. M is confident Carl has no intention of using the knife at school, but only as protection getting and going home. Even so, he brought it into class knowing about the zero tolerance rules.

If the incident goes unreported by Ms. M, it is a violation of the school policy and teacher professionalism as defined by the school. Additionally, the reporting student

may well lose trust in Ms. M. It also may well be that the reporting student was not the only one who saw the knife.

Study Questions for The Trajectory of a Kitchen Knife

1. Why do you think the school has a no-knife policy?
2. Do you think there are good reasons for such a policy?
3. Do the positive effects of having a no-knife policy depend on there actually being no knives, or just on everyone believing that there are no knives?
4. If Carl carries a knife but nobody knows about it, would that be OK?
5. If every student carried a knife, but no student knew about the other students' knives, would that be OK?
6. How should the teacher respond to the testimony of the student who saw the knife?
7. Is it reasonable for her to doubt that the student is telling her the truth? If so, what should she do next?
8. What would she have to know in order to justifiably trust the student's testimony?
9. If Carl is expelled, what do you think is likely to happen?
10. If the school makes an exception for him, what do you think is likely to happen?
11. Which of these scenarios is likely to be worse overall?