

#### **4. What the Principal Knew**

Two students, Steve and Jim, who have known each other for a couple of years, are in a classroom fight in the middle of the school year. What began as a round of “horse play” (confirmed by both boys) somehow then escalated into a full-blown fist fight. Steve ended up pushed against a cabinet, sliding down to the floor with the wind knocked out of him. His worst injury was a small scratch to his face that bled a bit.

Jim, seeing the blood and Steve on the floor, immediately stopped fighting. Both students ended up in the principal’s office. Steve--now seen as the victim – was upset and embarrassed. Jim – now seen as the aggressor – was equally upset, but also very nervous. The parents of each student were contacted and asked to immediately come to the school. A parent for each student arrived within a half hour.

Steve’s mother, upon seeing the scratch, immediately became upset. She wanted justice for her child and wanted Jim to be arrested for assault. Jim’s father became angry upon hearing this and felt that something must have provoked his child to fight. Both parents had to be calmed down by the principal in order to hear more details about the situation, and to learn what punishment the principal intended to give the boys.

Because the students had never been in trouble before, and the fight was reported by all witnesses as having been escalated by both of them, the principal believed both boys were equally guilty of it turning horse play into a fight. But he also believed that Jim did not intentionally scratch Steve. The principal’s punishment, therefore, was that both students should be suspended for three days. Upon their return, the students, parents, and classroom teacher would meet to discuss what led to the fight, the impact of their behavior, and ways the two students might make amends. This process, he believed, would restore the classroom community and allow the students a “problem solving” teaching moment.

Steve’s mother, however, did not think this punishment was appropriate as it would not achieve justice for her child. She also believed the punishment only victimized her child a second time and would never “teach” Jim anything about his bad behavior.

Jim’s father agreed with the principal’s punishment and was relieved his child would not miss more than three days of school in the middle of the academic year. He also did not think Jim was acting maliciously when the fight escalated but rather, was simply defending himself.

Steve's mother then threatened the principal by saying she would contact the police about Jim--if he did not. Jim's father, in turn, made his son apologize on the spot to Steve and his mother for his actions. He pleaded with the principal not to let Steve's mother contact the police. It would, he feared, make a criminal out of his child.

The principal did not know how to proceed. On the one hand, he had to acknowledge that the victim was physically hurt. At the same time, he felt that the victim was mostly just embarrassed by the incident. More aware than the parents that this kind of behavior was common among high school students, the principal also felt conflicted. The last thing he wanted is for Jim to have to deal with the police or the juvenile justice system over this fairly minor school fight. But he also felt he must address Steve's mother's concerns.

### **Study Questions for What the Principal Knew**

1. Why is it that the boy with a small cut to his face became automatically seen as the "victim"?
2. Is there any evidence that his intentions, going into the fight, were different from those of the "aggressor"?
3. Should it be the boys' intentions that determine whether they are equally guilty, or should it be the effects of their actions?
4. Is it reasonable to think that Steve - the boy with a cut to his face - was harmed more than Jim - the one who emerged with no physical injuries?
5. What else does the principal need to find out in order to know this?
6. Should the boys be punished in proportion to the harm they caused each other?
7. What is it to harm someone?
8. What obligations does the principal have to each of Steve and Jim? To Jim's relieved father? To Steve's pushy mother?
9. Does he have obligations to anyone else that are relevant here?
10. How should he balance the conflicting claims that these different individuals are making on him?
11. If he tells the mother that fights of this sort are common at the school, what do you think will be the likely effects of his doing so?