

CRITICAL INCIDENT – THE ANGRY PARENT

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Entrepreneurial startups in the daycare and preschool industry have become commonplace as state and federal funding has increased to support financially challenged families.

Management of primary schools, employee and student safety, taxpayer equity, and government funding for low-income families are often contentious issues. This real-life case presents severe problems at one school in a major urban school district.

INTRODUCTION

“I’LL HAVE YOUR JOB FOR THIS!” shouted the angry father. This tall and very loud man towered over the teacher, Andrea Ross. I’LL GO ALL THE WAY TO DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS IF I HAVE TO, I WILL SUE THE DISTRICT FOR MILLIONS IF THEY DON’T GET RID OF YOU”, he fired over his shoulder as he walked out of the classroom.

Ross took a few deep breaths, fighting to hold back tears because of the intimidating actions. She thought to herself; this was not the way to start the 2019 school year. Could he really get her fired? What could she do?

ANDREA ROSS

Ross was well-known for her success in working with all her students, including students with disabilities and their parents. Administrators and representatives from the larger school district often brought visitors to her classroom to demonstrate it as an operationally exemplar model classroom. Over 15 years, she had successfully managed diverse classrooms with students and parents representing a broad spectrum of the population. Ross’s classrooms were made up of about half typical students and half with learning disabilities. She had successfully moved all her students except one into mainstream traditional education programs for typical students. Ross’s rate was very high compared to her colleagues and other teachers in the greater school system. Her annual reviews were always high, with mostly ‘exceeds expectations’ rankings. Students loved her, and parents were delighted in the improvement she was able to achieve in their children. She had received several awards for working with both students and parents.

Personally, Ross was small in stature and not used to confrontation or violence. In her family, issues were resolved collaboratively without yelling or threatening. She had earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics education and had gone on to excel in a Master's of Early Childhood Special Education program at one of the top schools of education in the U.S., earning not one (the typical number for most teachers) but four state board teaching certifications including two for students with disabilities - birth to two and two to sixth grade.

Ross had also taken over 600 hours of in-service teacher training after receiving her master's degree.

THE SCHOOL OWNERS

Mr. Norman Smith had previously worked as a high-level director for a large corporate office near the school. He was very good at writing reports proposals if needed. It seemed from his self-reports and discussions with his employees, including Ross and other teachers, that he had done well at his previous occupation. His story was that he had been shot in one of his upper extremities because of something that happened at work. This incident caused him to rethink his career choice. He decided to partner with Mrs. Angela Verbrucken (his spouse) to go into business by opening a combination daycare and preschool.

Mr. Smith had completed the applications to open the business and functioned as the school's accountant and payroll administrator. He also drove the small 16 passenger school bus the school owned and did the grounds work and minor maintenance on the buildings.

Mrs. Verbrucken had a bachelor's degree in education but had never worked in that field. She ran most of the front office work, including human resource hiring, reviewing parents' applications to join the school, and talking with parents and teachers. She oversaw compliance and monitored the classroom cameras when she had time. Mrs. Verbrucken had previously worked in a low to mid-level human resource position for a small business.

THE SMITH CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER SCHOOL

The Smith Child Development Center (SCDC) was founded in 2005 in a large southeast city in the United States using state government funding to provide preschool education to families whose reported income was below a certain threshold.

The school was in an area affected by poverty and a medium level of crime. The community demographics were mostly low-income members or unemployed.

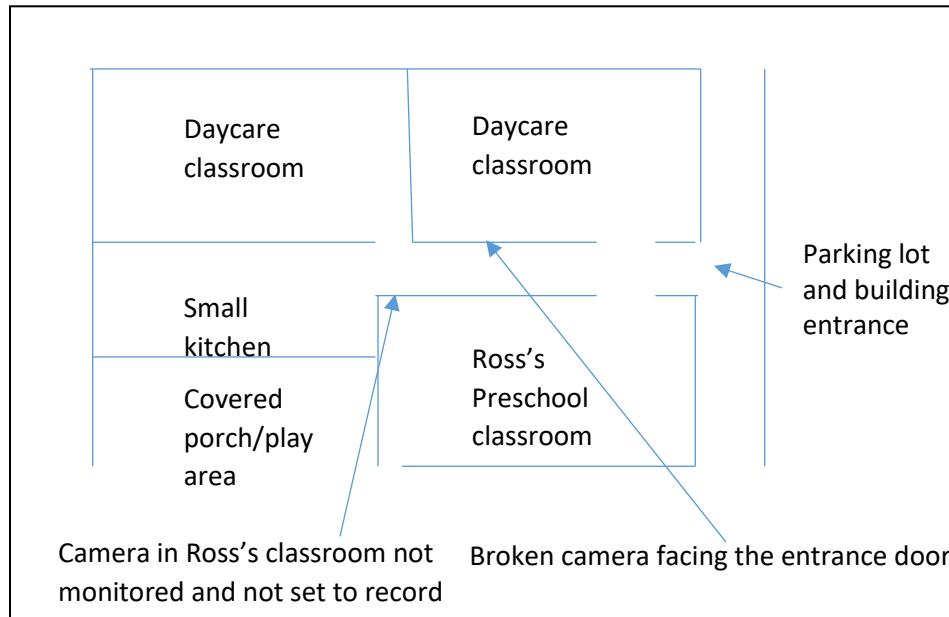
Building, home, and automobile robberies were frequent in the surrounding area. The school itself was made up of several small buildings, each holding two to four classrooms and a small fenced-in central playground. The school was started to serve mainly a preschool population. These children were under six years old, and most had parents whose reported income was below a certain threshold to qualify for free admission to the school.

Admission to the school came in two forms; parents who could pay the daycare and preschool fees and second, by state funding for parents who had low-income. The central school district has outlined specific standards that must be met regarding total assets and income thresholds for admission. The district had drafted rigorous compliance standards and guidelines, and school owners were expected to follow the guidelines. Funding to the school for those parents/students who qualified was generous and included payroll, health insurance, retirement benefits, meal plans, classroom furniture/technology allotment, and some facility maintenance reimbursement. Fees for non-qualified higher-income parents were charged directly to the parents.

Before each school year, the teacher, accompanied by the teaching assistant or another school representative, visited the household of the families accepted into the state-funded school program. These visits were a required step in the academic program for low-income parents to meet the teacher, provide coaching for the parents about how they could support their child's learning, and to explain to parents the importance of enabling the child to practice what they learned in school at home. It also provided the teacher with an opportunity to evaluate and observe the home environment so that the teacher could best support the child and the parents' learning needs. These visits usually took a little over an hour and required some basic reporting from the teacher regarding the visit interactions.

In recent years, the school faced several problems, including street vendors walking into classrooms and the school administration failing to pay employee insurance premiums on time, causing some employees to receive cancellation notices for health benefits for 90 days of non-payment. While no benefits were ever canceled, employees were always under stress that they would be. Further, the school was not paying retirement benefits as stated in employee contracts even though central district funding had been provided for these line items in advance. Some employees were owed more than \$8,000 in retirement benefits that had not been paid in years. Most employees would not complain about the retirement benefits because they were happy just to have a job. Moreover, some parents misreported their income to take advantage of the free state-funded daycare and preschool services.

The school was made up of several small buildings and a central playground. There was a small kitchen to provide free breakfast and lunch to the students. There were six classrooms, and each classroom had a teacher, an assistant, and approximately 18 students. Cameras had been installed at each building's entry door and in each classroom to monitor the buildings and the teachers. The security cameras were initially installed to monitor the teachers for liability reasons, protect against false claims by parents, and monitor the buildings' security. However, the school owners had not learned to use the cameras correctly, and with all their extensive duties, watching the cameras was sporadic at best. Several of the cameras were broken and never fixed. The door camera at the door where this critical incident takes place had been broken for over a year.



Layout of building 3

Part 1: A Recent Incident Earlier This Week: The working environment

Ms. Jones, the teaching assistant in Ross's classroom, had been working in this school for five years with three years as Andrea Ross's assistant. She was hired because she was a friend of the owner, Mrs. Verbrucken. She had a high school diploma and was attempting to complete classes toward a bachelor's degree. She frequently earned low grades and asked Andrea Ross for help to complete her homework to improve her grades. Recently, Ms. Jones got in an argument with a parent and asked the parent to "STEP OUTSIDE, I WILL KILL YOUR *&^%\$." The incident was loud and unprofessional, with, among other complaints, the parent accusing Jones of stealing her daughter's jacket and lying to her daughter about it.

“YOU DON’T DO ME LIKE THAT, YOU STOLE MY GIRLS JACKET, YOU !@4\$##786*&%^\$. IF YOU DON’T RETURN IT NOW, I WILL KICK YOUR FACE IN, RIGHT NOW!” While the conversation was upsetting some of the students, most of them had heard the language and seen this type of interaction frequently at home. Andrea Ross intervened and brought the situation to a calm and peaceful conclusion. However, after the incident, the teacher’s assistant commented about how brave Ross was and asked her where her gun was. Ross was surprised by this and responded with, “What do you mean”? Jones replied, “well, I have always carried my gun in my purse, but my permit was taken away last month due to a drug violation, so now all I carry is this” as she opened her purse and displayed a hunting knife with an eight-inch blade. “I have another one in my car,” Jones said.

Andrea Ross was thrown off her game, and when she got home that evening broke down and cried. She was overwhelmed and now feeling intimidated by the thought of parents who might come into the classroom armed similarly to the teaching assistant. She had been working with Jones for three years, tutoring her with her homework, and never knew Jones had a weapon. Ross had never seen a weapon in the classroom before and wondered what the laws were. She assumed it was illegal and substantiated this by remembering larger schools in the district that had guards with portable metal detectors. A few years ago, she read that state law prohibited anyone from carrying a gun on school grounds, and she was not aware of whether the law had changed.

To make matters worse for the teacher, the camera inside Ross’s classroom was not monitored and had not been set to record. The camera at the door to the building was not functioning, and many street vendors had walked into the classrooms selling black-market CDs and jewelry. This trespass was off-putting, a threat to safety, and an interruption to teaching as some of the teachers and teaching assistants would talk with the vendors and buy stuff.

The teacher’s confidence had been shaken. Her fear level had become real and ever-present. She was proud of her work and needed her job to support her own family and was now caught in a rough place, even more so because the teaching assistant was “good friends” with Mrs. Verbrucken, making it impossible for the teacher to file a complaint without it backfiring.

Ross had been present when other complaints had been filed by other teachers and seen Verbrucken’s friends exonerated, while the teacher filing the complaint began to find substandard evaluations in their human resource files, or on occasion, the complaining teacher was not offered a new contract for rehire the following year. Even in the larger district, “rocking the boat” was not well-received. Teachers who had challenged their terminations had not been successful.

Moreover, most of the teachers and assistants working at this school had very little extra or emergency money, living day-to-day just to buy groceries. They could not afford to experience even one week without a paycheck. No one complained because doing so seemed hopeless and hazardous. There was little opportunity to “look for another job” in a tight job market.

Ross and the other teachers had talked about the school's issues and were afraid to come forward.

The next day, Ross remembered that two students in the classroom had the same jacket. She surmised that the jacket belonging to the complaining parent's child was accidentally taken home by another student. Ross called the child's parent who mistakenly took the jacket, and it was returned the next day.

Even though Ross had solved the minor issue of the missing jacket, she was worried and afraid about the other incidents that had occurred with her teaching assistant and did not know how to proceed without jeopardizing her stellar evaluations and her job.

Part 2: Today’s Incident

Yesterday, while the children from the classroom were on the playground, two four-year-old boys were running/racing shoulder to shoulder and bumped each other. Both boys fell, and one scraped his arm.

Today the father of the child, Mr. Williams, came to the classroom, barged in while the teacher was working with students, and yelled at Ross, asking why his son had scratches on his arm. The man was tall, loud, and intimidating, and while speaking with the teacher about the incident became even more threatening by flailing his arms and invading her personal space.

“I’LL HAVE YOUR JOB FOR THIS!” shouted Williams. This tall and very loud man towered over Ross and glared angrily at her from inches away from her face.

Ross had already explained that she was not on the playground as it was not her day to supervise the area and further stated that many young children have occasional slips on the playground and get minor scrapes.

The parent continued to berate Ross with intimidating body proximity, posture, and threatening facial expressions and words. The parent stated he would be back and it would be even worse for the teacher.

“I’LL GO ALL THE WAY TO DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS IF I HAVE TO. I WILL SUE THE DISTRICT FOR MILLIONS IF THEY DON’T GET RID OF YOU,” Williams fired over his shoulder as he walked out of the classroom.

When Ross went home that evening, she thought about what to do. The owner, Mrs. Smith, would likely do nothing because the school could not afford to lose state funding by losing even a single student. Ross felt that right or wrong; the owner was likely to side with the parent because of income and revenue concerns for the school that were based on the number of students that stayed in the program, not the number of teachers the school kept.

Ross also knew that this was one of the parents who had falsely under-reported income to obtain free tuition into the school. In collaboration with the owner, each teacher reviewed all the admissions applications, including financial documents, to determine if parents met the low income and minimum net worth requirements outlined by the government. Additionally, as part of the onboarding process, the teacher was required to visit each family’s house and conduct an evaluation of the child’s living conditions and lead an orientation with a parent of the prospective student. During this home visit, Ross learned that Mrs. Williams was not working. Ross learned from Mrs. Williams that the family owned the house - a high-end six-bedroom, three-car garage home with a pool and the three new luxury vehicles in the driveway. Ross estimated based on make and model, each of the vehicle's retail price at the dealer was over \$70,000. This information is highly relevant as part of the application process for tuition-free admission to the funded program. Ross wondered how this family’s IRS 1040 and other financial documents could be misleading and where the additional income came from.

Any action in court against Mr. Williams would be futile without a video recording in the classroom and could even turn into a lawsuit against the school by a parent looking for a business or someone with “deep pockets” to sue frivolously. Moreover, Ross had mentioned the income reporting discrepancies to Ms. Smith during the admission selection process, and Ross’s comments had been ignored.

The next day, Ross examined the son’s arm, and the small scratches were healing well and would be gone in a couple of days. However, Mr. Williams was continuing to threaten the teacher with a lawsuit. He stated that he was coming back. I’LL BE BACK! He yelled when he was leaving Ross’s classroom the second time.

Andrea Ross had discussed with Mrs. Smith two weeks before the start of the school year, and several months before the classroom incident with Williams, that this parent’s income and net worth had exceeded the limit for the state government-funded school admission. She had visited many homes over the years, and most

families rented their homes and did not have cars, using public transportation instead. If a family did have a car, it was not in very good condition. The school owners had done nothing to investigate further when suspicion was raised, as is required by the state guidelines. The owner had violated the government protocols for collecting adequate information to verify this parent's and several other parent's incomes and asset value (net worth). Thereby, obtaining funding for several students who did not qualify.

Part 3: Questionable Use of funds

Additional issues plagued the school, such as cameras not working, the lack of secure password-activated gates to the campus, the lack of pass access, or keyed doors to enter the buildings enabling both parents and street vendors uncontrolled access.

The staff had mentioned the lack of password-protected gates and doors to Mr. Smith. He claimed that the expense for this needed protection was too high. The owners stated that the cost of installing passcode protected gates and doors would have placed a burden on the school.

Even though the school had a tight budget and retirement benefits were not being paid, each year during spring break, the owners and staff (friends of the owners) who wanted to participate would go on a Caribbean trip. It was unknown where the money came from, but some employees surmised that it came from funds acquired in violation of state government standards. Teachers, assistant teachers, and staff who wanted to go would buy their plane ticket. The owners negotiated a group rate for hotel accommodations that all members of the group took advantage. Some entertainment was paid for by the owners as an employee perk. Ross had never participated in this trip.

When combined with the school administrator's failure to pay employee insurance premiums on time and not paying retirement benefits as stated in employee contracts even though government funding had been provided for these line items in advance, several employees were disgruntled but had remained quiet for fear of being fired.

The owners were many years behind on paying retirement (more than seven years, some were owed over \$8,000 in retirement benefits) and often late on paying health benefits. They had not spent money on the upkeep of cameras, door locks, and a security person to monitor the cameras, yet the owners would take an extravagant vacation each year to the Caribbean.