

A Rock of a Hard Place

SCENARIO: An oversized rock sits just outside the high school that students paint with messages promoting school events, pending principal permission. After an interracial fight, a group of students paints the rock with “Black Lives Matter” to protest the principal’s handling, though the principal had asked them to discuss the matter with him before doing anything. When these students are disciplined for vandalism and insubordination, they protest to the superintendent. How should he respond?



ROARK HORN: This would be a great opportunity to coach the principal to understand there is a time and place to use positional power, and this wasn’t that time. The goal should have been to use this incident to build empathy and understanding, rather than jumping right to the discipline phase just because the students did not do what he asked them to do.

It is not too late for learning to happen as long as the superintendent is strategic. He should empower the principal to fix the situation and coach him on how to do that. Requiring the principal to meet with students and seek to understand their motivation for not doing as he asked would be a good first step. Regardless, it is essential the superintendent not exacerbate the situation by taking the side of the students or the principal, at least at this stage.

CHRIS NICASTRO: The superintendent may choose to rely on a U.S. Supreme Court decision that “school-sponsored” activities do not constitute a forum for student free speech rights. While painting on the rock may not be an official school activity, the fact that prior posts had the principal’s permission conveys the message that the school has taken responsibility for the content. As such, the principal’s actions did not violate the students’ free speech rights.

See the panelists’ full analyses of this case at aasa.org/ethical-educator.

However, this ignores the underlying issue of racial tension. The superintendent should direct the principal to develop a plan to address issues of racial equity and conflict resolution with the students and staff. Confronting the issue and providing a space for constructive dialogue could head off further episodes.

Further, the principal must meet with those involved in the fight, identify the specifics that caused the altercation and work with them to develop a mutually acceptable method of student expression and conflict resolution.

MARIA OTT: An interracial fight is a dramatic and dangerous event reflecting internal tensions that impact student well-being. By painting “Black Lives Matter” on the rock outside the school, some students are expressing their free speech in a place that is used for public messages. The principal maintains a practice of pre-approving all messages on the rock, and in this case, it was made clear that approval was required.

The principal may view the painted message as an act of defiance and vandalism while the students may believe that the terminology is broadly accepted in society to express support for fairness and to oppose racism in all its forms. The principal must be careful that actions match the offense. The response must consider the sensitive nature of responding to interracial conflict. The incident is the serious matter that needs attention, not the message on the rock.

SHELDON BERMAN: School policies restricting messaging to school events and requiring prior principal permission ensure the rock legally remains a limited public forum — not where anyone can paint political or personal messages. Disciplinary action affirmed those policies. The deeper issue is the surfacing of interracial conflict, which administrators must address relative to the fight plus any undercurrents within the student body or school administration.

The superintendent should hear the students’ concerns and, while maintaining confidentiality, explain the complexity of situations such as this. In meeting with student protesters, his primary goal is to redirect them to the school’s administration and faculty for dialogue about steps all parties could take to promote positive interracial relationships throughout the school community. The superintendent should inform the principal about the students’ perceptions of administrator bias and discuss actions the principal could take to address them.

Each month, *School Administrator* draws on actual circumstances to raise an ethical decision-making dilemma in K-12 education. Suggestions for dilemmas may be submitted to magazine@aasa.org.

The Ethical Educator panel consists of **SHELDON H. BERMAN**, AASA lead superintendent, Redmond, Ore.; **ROARK HORN**, Pomerantz endowed professor in educational excellence, University of Northern Iowa; **CHRIS NICASTRO**, former Missouri commissioner of education; and **MARIA G. OTT**, Irving R. and Virginia A. Melbo chair in education administration, University of Southern California.