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Tyranny of the 10 Year Olds

Critics say an educational philosophy called ENVoY and a tone-deaf principal have enabled a suburban elementary school to devolve into a culture of chaos and violence.

By Catrin Wigfall

This past winter, a group of elementary students at Ramsey Elementary School were participating in gym class. Shortly into the class, a student with a history of disruptive behavior melted into a tantrum that quickly escalated into an emotional explosion. The student started loudly berating other children and even began kicking at them.

As he showed no signs of letting up, the two gym teachers leading the class and one paraprofessional grew alarmed.

Help from the school's administrative office was radioed for. No one answered.

The student then turned to one of the teachers and began swearing at her and threatening to "slap the shit outta her." He flung a trashcan at her, followed by another. Several pieces of gym equipment were grabbed next and thrown while staff continued to radio for help.

Still, no response.

The teacher, fearing for the safety of her students, tried to escort the student out of the gym where she thought she could calm him down. But the student responded by punching, kicking, and scratching the teacher.

Another plea for assistance was radioed out. Again, radio silence.

The incident lasted an excruciating 20 minutes before the student started to run out of gas. No one from the school's administrative office showed up to help or even acknowledged the panicked teachers' appeals for help. Nor did they show up to help during past violent episodes involving the same student.

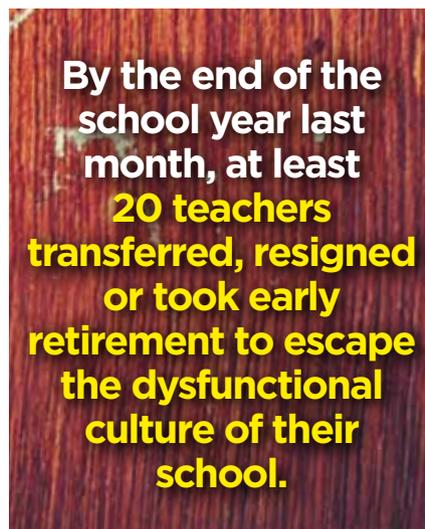
Students returned to their classroom. Incredibly, a school policy focused on decreasing office referrals and keeping disruptive students in the classroom allowed the boy to spend a tense remainder of his day with his class, even after assaulting a teacher. His outburst drew no penalties. There were no consequences for his behavior.

It took three hours for someone from the school's administrative office to check on the beaten teacher.

This scene, described by a Ramsey Elementary teacher who requested anonymity, invites some obvious questions.

Why was this behavior tolerated? Why did no one from the school's administrative office respond or acknowledge repeated calls for assistance? And what kind of educational policy disdains consequences for aberrant behavior?

Critics say the incident illustrates how an educational philosophy called ENVoY and a tone-deaf principal have enabled the culture of this 1,200-student suburban elementary school to devolve into chaotic violence in which classroom teachers fear for their own safety, as well as for their students. By the end of the school year last month, at least 20 teachers transferred, resigned or took early retirement



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For the record, much of the information in this report was gathered from teachers and staff at Ramsey Elementary School, most of whom requested anonymity out of fear of workplace reprisals. Each fact was verified by at least two sources. Amy Reed, Ramsey's principal, referred questions from *Thinking Minnesota* about her school's tumultuous school year to Jim Skelly, Anoka-Hennepin School's director of communication and public relations.

Background

The gym incident was one of many that occurred within the early stages of Dr. Amy Reed's new term as principal. Reed

transitioned to Ramsey from a previous administrative role at another elementary school. Part of her mission, according to Skelly, was to improve Ramsey's academic performance and enact a district-wide transition to a system that mainstreams special education students and has teachers handle behavior issues in class.

Ramsey Elementary is a first through fifth grade school that started in 1978 in Ramsey, a middle-class suburb 22 miles northwest of downtown Minneapolis. Its student body is about 79 percent white, nine percent black, four percent Hispanic, and four percent two or more races.

Reed arrived at Ramsey Elementary last fall after serving as principal at Eisenhower Elementary since 2015 and prior to that as assistant principal at Rum River Elementary, both located in the Anoka-Hennepin school district. While at Rum River, Reed learned a new approach to discipline called the ENVoY model—Educational Non-Verbal Yardsticks. Teachers within the Anoka-Hennepin school district wanted more support with behavior issues, according to Skelly, and selected ENVoY as one system to help with classroom management. The district started using ENVoY in 2013 and has been working to implement the program at various levels district-wide. By the time Reed was delivering her 2018 doctoral dissertation on ENVoY, all 24 elementary schools in the district had been exposed to the program.

Developed in 1993 by a Seattle-based educator, ENVoY teaches non-verbal skills and strategies to minimize the effects of behavioral classroom disruptions. Implementing ENVoY is expected to raise test results, lower discipline referrals, and help a school's culture become calm and safe.

Educators are taught "Seven Gems" that help them use their body, gestures, facial expressions, breathing, and voice to "manage their classrooms and build relationships with students" with respect to the "diverse learners" in each classroom, according to a presentation on ENVoY to the Anoka-Hennepin school board by Jen Mares, an ENVoY coach. The

Seven Gems are: Freeze Body, ABOVE (Pause) Whisper, Raise Your Hand vs. Speak Out, Visual Exit Directions, Most Important Twenty Seconds, OFF/Neutral/ON, and Influence Approach.

After teachers learn the non-verbal techniques, they are observed by ENVoY coaches and given feedback on how well the skills are being implemented throughout a daily lesson.

The district recognized Principal Reed for successfully implementing the ENVoY techniques in her previous administrative positions, where the program apparently led to lower suspension and dismissal numbers and higher test results. ENVoY was introduced to Ramsey in 2013, the district's spokesperson Jim Skelly said, but Reed's past experience with the program led her to put more emphasis on its use and build it out at an accelerated pace.

There was also interest in improving Ramsey's lower academic performance when compared to other elementary schools with similar demographics in the district. Test scores at Ramsey had dropped in the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years, and student proficiency was trending downward.

It didn't work

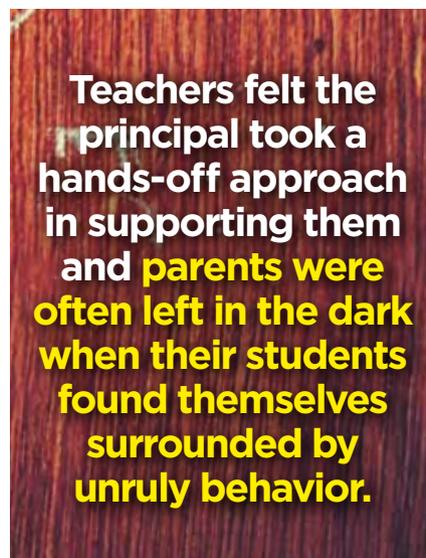
But these strategies and changes didn't work at Ramsey, according to parents who reached out to *Thinking Minnesota* and communications with teachers. They pointed out that an alarming increase in in-class disruptions and playground altercations had led to chaotic classrooms, which was a change to the school's climate. Teachers felt the school's principal took a hands-off approach in supporting them and parents were often left in the dark when their students found themselves surrounded by unruly behavior.

Under the ENVoY model, teachers are given strategies and best practices to resolve behavior issues in class so students don't leave the classroom and lose out on learning opportunities, according to the district's spokesperson Jim Skelly.

However, ENVoY's goal of reducing time students spend out of the classroom often led to classroom evacuations and interrupted learning time, according to reports from teachers and parents. Carrie

Mock, a parent of a Ramsey third grader, was told by her daughter that her class had to evacuate its classroom because a student was throwing chairs. The student remained in the classroom the rest of the day, and the teacher was left to wait out the student's behavior before bringing the rest of the class back in, Mock said.

Spokesman Skelly countered that teachers who effectively used ENVoY techniques viewed the approach in a "positive way." But the teachers not adapting to it, he said, "are the ones who maybe don't see it as a positive for deal-



ing with their classroom."

In addition to ramping up ENVoY, Ramsey used 2018 to begin mainstreaming special education students as part of a new district-wide plan.

Mainstreaming means special education students spend as much time as possible in the general education classroom with peers who do not receive special education services. It is part of determining the "least restrictive environment" or LRE for a student to learn in as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Some teachers worried that IDEA does not spell out the LRE for each type of disability. And because there isn't necessarily one "right" learning environment for all kids, it may better serve a student to learn separately.

Principal Reed directed that all special education students would spend their entire days within the mainstream set-

ting, according to one teacher at Ramsey with an extensive special education background, who is also a parent of a student who has received special education services. Students learn at different rates, she said, with differing abilities or disabilities that impact their learning. "For the administration to say that all students will benefit from spending the entire day learning within a classroom is not accurate."

Along with keeping all students in the general classroom, Reed implemented a "push-in" teaching model in which special ed students are joined in their classroom by another teacher with other students for small group instruction. Besides the additional bodies in the classroom, which were distracting, some of the push-in groups contained students with disruptive behavior tendencies, according to a current third grade teacher.

Poor communication

The uptick in behavior issues at Ramsey was not communicated to parents, and when parents asked for more information, responses were vague and unclear, parent Carrie Mock said. "My child came home with a story nearly every day, but we did not get emails about those incidents from Principal Reed. Parents are begging for better communication from administrative leadership either by email or phone or even when we meet in person, and all we are told is it's being looked into."

Because parents did not receive phone calls or written notifications about behavior incidents, parents were forced to rely on their children to tell them about the fights and classroom evacuations, according to Jennifer O'Connor, parent of a Ramsey fifth grader.

"My son was punched in the face at recess, and I heard nothing about it from the school," O'Connor said. "I asked him if he told anyone he was punched. 'No,' he said. 'Everybody gets punched at recess. It's normal.'"

Parents step in

In February, a group of around 15 Ramsey parents realized they had all been hearing from their children and their children's teachers similar stories of stu-

dent violence and no corrective measures being taken. Parents of special education students were concerned by the school's decision to change special education services and keep their student in the regular classroom full-time.

Parents voiced their concerns about violence and student safety at a February 25 school board meeting. They requested better communication and discipline follow-through for behaviors that warranted consequences, and asked for better support to meet the individualized needs of their students requesting special education services, since those services had been changed at the beginning of the school year.

Dustin Reeder, a father of a fourth-grader, told the board he was at Ramsey to eat lunch with his son one Friday. When his son came in from recess, he had a bruised face, bloody lip and his shirt was ripped. Reeder's son had been tackled from behind by another boy and responded by pushing the boy. Immediately, six other boys jumped on Reeder's son and began kicking his body and landing blows to his face.

Reeder took his son to the principal's office and was told she was "unavailable," but when Reeder began explaining the fight, Principal Reed immediately stepped out of her office. She asked the fourth grader in two different ways whether he felt safe at Ramsey.

"No" was his response both times. He didn't feel safe at recess; he didn't feel safe at lunch; he didn't feel safe in the hallways.

Reed punished all the boys involved—including Reeder's son—by keeping them from recess the following Monday.

In March, School Board Chair Tom Heidemann responded to the parent testimony in writing, listing "steps" that were being taken "to support the staff, students and families at Ramsey," which included district leadership "visiting" with parents and community members and holding staff meetings to review the concerns. Additionally, Heidemann stated Ramsey was reviewing and updating its "crisis response plan" so staff understood the "process for requesting support."

But parents continued to hear from their children about aggressive behav-

ior—and physically see evidence it was still happening.

"It took my daughter coming home with bruise marks on her neck for me to find out she had been strangled four different times," a parent of a third grader said. No call home, the other girl involved just had recess taken away.

Administration responds

Reed emailed parents and guardians the beginning of April to say she was "very sorry to hear" parents had the perception there was a lack of administrative response to their concerns about school safety and the overall climate at Ramsey.

She pledged to improve. "As a parent, you should expect to be notified by a teacher, case manager, or administrator when your student is involved in a disruptive or violent incident," she said.

Reed said Ramsey had added weekly support from a district elementary behavior-and-discipline specialist and brought in a current principal at another elementary school to "assist." She also promised more information about the school's behavioral guidelines and interventions.

Parent Carrie Mock said the follow-up communication never arrived. Frustration over no improvement in communication from the school and lack of support for teachers struggling to handle student behaviors on their own led a group of around 100 teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and students to hold a "walk-in" outside Ramsey in the middle of April.

The walk-in was organized by Ramsey parents and supported by the local teachers' union. Parents brought gifts of school supplies for teachers as a sign of support. They carried signs that said, "Anoka-Hennepin students deserve leadership."

During a May PTO meeting, an additional promise from Reed was made to "improve communication going forward" after parents spoke out against the administration's handling of a knife being brought to school. Parents were not informed of the incident but found out through third parties.

Next steps

The challenging and chaotic school year has caused many Ramsey teachers to reconsider their time at the school.

According to one staff member's unofficial count, at least 20 teachers have left through retirement, new schools, termination or leaves—not including the paraprofessionals and other staff members who have already left. District spokesperson Jim Skelly said the start of a new elementary school this fall in Ramsey, Brookside Elementary, is contributing to staff turnover. "There will be 450 students transitioning from Ramsey to Brookside next year, so some of the staff movement is because students will be moving, too."

A veteran teacher of 27 years chose early retirement because the 2018 school year at Ramsey was her "hardest. I can no longer be treated as I have this year, nor can I condone the way many of my colleagues have suffered."

She was forced to evacuate her classroom numerous times due to chairs being thrown, bookcases toppled, and desks being flipped, she said. One chair-throwing instance became so intense the teacher only had time to quickly tuck students under tables and desks near the front of the classroom to keep them safe.

"Almost every year you have some of 'those kids,' but this year was different," the teacher said. "How? Lack of administrative involvement and consequences."

The district confirmed no leadership changes at Ramsey will be forthcoming. "It appears Principal Reed has been responsive to all these concerns. Whether staff fully accepts that doesn't mean attempts to address concerns aren't being made," spokesperson Skelly said.

But parents will continue standing up for the safety of students and teachers at the school, despite being told that "school leadership has said they just need to wait us out until the end of the year and we'll go away," parent Jennifer O'Connor said.

Parents and teachers are concerned Ramsey is headed in a fast, downward spiral. The reign of distrust and disorder at the school will take time to heal, and faith in leadership will take time to be restored. Changes are needed, they say, and for the sake of student and teacher safety, these changes cannot wait. ★

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