

Hypnotic Suggestion: North Port High School and the Complicity of Indifference

Education Law Notes

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Concluding what must be one of the oddest public school disputes in recent memory, the Sarasota County Board of Education in Florida has agreed to resolve a lawsuit brought by three sets of parents, each of whom claimed that their children died as a result of being hypnotized by George Kenney, the former Principal of North Port High School. All three students died in 2011, two by suicide and one in a car accident. According to the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, Kenney admitted hypnotizing all three students, including one who hanged himself the following day. The case, which was scheduled for trial on October 12, 2015, was settled in consideration for the payment of \$200,000 to each of the three families, the most any state agency can agree to pay without getting authorization from the Florida legislature and governor.

The student who committed suicide within a day of a hypnosis session with Kenney had reportedly been seeking to improve his guitar playing in anticipation of an audition with Julliard. The parents of the other student who committed suicide claimed that Kenney had somehow determined she had test anxiety and advised her that hypnosis could help boost her SAT scores. When her results did not, in fact, improve, she became “despondent” and subsequently hanged herself soon after completing her college applications. The third student was a quarterback on the school’s football team and had been hypnotized by Kenney in an attempt to improve his focus and quell his concerns about pain. He was killed following what was described as a painful dentist visit, when the student suddenly steered his car off the interstate, an accident his parents attribute to the self-hypnosis that Kenney had taught him.

Kenney, who before becoming an administrator had been a music teacher, held no certifications or licenses in the area of hypnotherapy. He had instead watched DVDs on hypnosis and had also attended a multi-day hypnosis training session. According to the *Herald-Tribune*, on three separate occasions prior to these students’ deaths, Kenney’s supervisor had told him to stop practicing his hypnosis, directives he obviously ignored. Following the three student deaths, the school district conducted an investigation, which determined that he had hypnotized approximately 75 children and adults. In 2012, he was charged with two misdemeanors, including practicing therapeutic hypnosis without a license, to which he pled no contest. He was placed on one year of probation, resigned in June 2012, and in 2013 gave up his teaching license.

Resolving wrongful death claims for the relatively modest amount of \$200,000 might suggest that each set of parents was concerned that they would be unable to establish a direct causal link between the hypnosis and the deaths. Conversely, in agreeing to pay a total of \$600,000 to settle these three claims, the school board

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may have feared that because the students had Kenney’s hypnosis sessions – and perhaps nothing else -- in common, and because all three students died subsequent to these sessions, a jury would have found it all too easy to connect the dots.

So What Is The Lesson?

The moral of this strange, and ultimately terrible, case is fairly obvious – unqualified school personnel should not practice therapy on impressionable students. Equally clear is the obligation of school districts to take the necessary steps to curb such irresponsible behavior. The fact that Kenney was directed on three separate occasions to cease and desist clearly demonstrates that the district was not only aware that Kenney was practicing his “therapeutic” hobby on students but that he was ignoring district directives. Nonetheless, its lack of a meaningful response enabled Kenney to continue holding himself out as something he most definitely was not, an answer to the fears and anxieties of vulnerable students.

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