

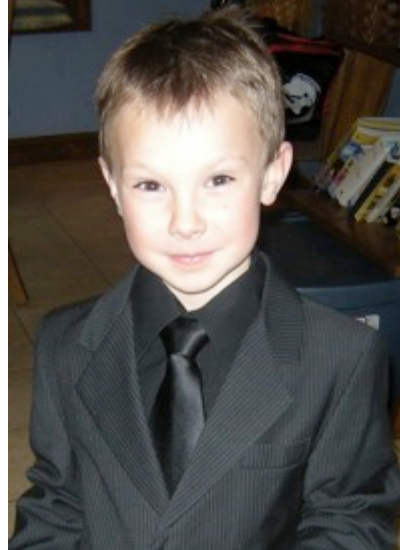


Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on October 15, 2009

Six-year-old Suspended for Bringing Camping Utensils to School Wins Reprieve

Zachary Christie won't have to attend reform school after all. As you may know, Zachary is the button-cute Cub Scout who brought a hobo tool (containing a spoon, fork, knife, and bottle opener) to school because he wanted to eat lunch with it.

This prompted school officials to immediately suspend the Newark, Delaware, first-grader under their "zero tolerance" policy on weapons, which mandates the same punishment for all students who bring a knife to school regardless of its type and "regardless of the possessor's intent."



That punishment would have kept Zachary out of his school, Jennie Smith Elementary, for a month and a half. But that changed when the six-year-old's story became national news and prompted a vigorous public outcry. CBSnews.com treats the matter, writing:

The seven-member Christina School Board [CSB] voted unanimously to reduce the punishment for kindergartners and first-graders who take weapons to school or commit violent offenses to a suspension ranging from three to five days.

Zachary Christie, 6, had faced 45 days in an alternative school for troublemakers after he took the utensil to school to eat lunch last month. Now, he could return Wednesday.

CBS news called the CSB's change "hasty," and it was a case of haste to avoid waste (that of the district's reputation), because the officials never really had a chance. The story itself was outrageous enough to unite most across the political spectrum, but once Zachary's cherubic little face hit the national airwaves, it was all over. It much reminds me of the Iran-Contra hearings. When Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North testified in front of a joint congressional committee in 1987, looking like the handsome G.I. Joe prototype in his Marine Corps uniform emblazoned with medals, there was no longer a question as to how the court of public opinion would rule.

Yet this is part of the problem here. While I'm pleased Zachary won't be relegated to reform school, the Christina officials' actions are merely an effort at damage control and don't address the real issues.

Let's start with the simple. The CSB has reduced the punishment for kindergartners and first-graders who bring weapons to school or commit violent offenses to a three to five-day suspension. But what about a second-grader who is the age of a first-grader? What about any second-grader for that matter? What about a first-grader who commits an extremely violent act? After all, in these strange times we've heard stories about very young children attacking teachers in the most vicious ways.

The point is not that the CSB must tweak its rules further — as it has indicated it may do — the problem is applying a one-size-fits-all approach. Its code of conduct yielded injustice before and will now, and it always will as long as we fancy bureaucratic micromanagement a substitute for common sense. The



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problem is that the CSB and so many other school boards have robbed those on the ground, teachers and administrators, of the right to use discretion when meting out punishment, reducing them to terminator robots executing programmed instructions.

It's also lamentable that virtually no one in the media has delved into why discretion has been taken away, especially since the proximal reasons are easy to identify. For starters, as I [wrote](#) on Tuesday, this phenomenon is at least partially inspired by the politically correct thought police's race-card claim that allowing discretion causes black children to be punished more harshly for the "same offenses." Now, first, I don't think the studies used to support this thesis are worth the paper they're printed on; second, what we know for sure is that now good children (Zachary) are being punished just as harshly as bad children for different offenses. This is why blanket bureaucracy-born rules can never take the place of good judgment. As I also said in my last piece, just as a picture is worth a thousand words, common sense is worth a thousand rules.

So what has Zachary's story really changed? His punishment was reduced for the same reason why students such as him get punished disproportionately in the first place: schools want to avoid criticism and, in many cases, lawsuits.

Some will say that teachers have been denied the right to exercise discretion because they often lack a sense of it. This is true, but it is also parents today who often lack discretion. We're in the grip of a systemic problem, where not only are teachers more likely than their predecessors to make bad judgments, but parents are less likely than their grandparents to support teachers when they make good judgments. This is why schools should not shoulder all the blame. If teachers have to fear withering criticism, verbal assaults (and sometimes physical ones), and perhaps lawsuits from parents who see halos over their children's heads, can we blame them for passing the buck to school boards?

The shame of this is that it's best for parents and children if school principals are given great latitude regarding punishment. After all, students will then be judged by those closest to them and their actions — those who can apply the innumerable rules of common sense — and not a rigid but woefully incomplete standard comprising only a few rules. Second, it makes redress easier, as parents can easily gain access to those responsible for their children's punishment. If you want to address a school board, you have to wait for a meeting.

And what of principals with poor judgment? Well, first, such a person should be replaced. More significantly, though, we have to first ask which system will yield the least injustice: one that allows a few unfair principals to judge a small minority of students or one mandating that a necessarily unfair cookie-cutter standard will judge all students. Besides, you place your children in the hands of teachers, not school-board members. And if you cannot trust the former to make relatively simple judgments, why trust them with your children at all?

Some could now quote John Stuart Mill and say "I can hardly imagine any laws so bad, to which I would not rather be subject than to the caprice of a man" and point out that a teacher or principal is a man. Yet what happens when the law becomes so bad that the application of it becomes capricious?

What I mean is, you cannot have a healthy civilization unless two criteria are met: Citizens must have respect for the law.

And the law must be worthy of respect.

If the latter is not the case, the former becomes unlikely. After all, as another old saying goes, "The creation of frivolous laws undermines the credibility of all laws." When lawmakers cease to be just,



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lawbreaking becomes justifiable.

This brings me to something Debbie Christie, little Zachary's mother, said: "I also want him to know that he has a voice, and when things are not right, he can stand up and speak out against them." To be frank, this reflects bad parenting, as it isn't the place of six-year-olds to become activists — it's their parents place. Young children must be taught obedience; otherwise, you have the inmates running the asylum.

Yet obedience becomes less likely when relativistic lunatics run the asylum. After all, if authority figures are disobedient to Truth, only fear will prevent children from being disobedient to them. And it's a sad indictment of the system when justice is better grasped by six-year-olds than school boards.



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