

Role of Jean Francis

-Damian's Case-

Fairtown Elementary School is the biggest public elementary school in its urban area. It has approximately 700 students spanning grades K through 5. It has the largest Spanish speaking as well as the most racially diverse student population in the state. The students are split into three classrooms per grade, with approximately 30 to 40 students per classroom. The school is constantly recognized as a leader in the state, because of how well it works with an otherwise challenging student population as well as its administrative excellence. The school's Principal, Ms. Conti and its Vice-Principal, Ms. Rivera are a power-duo. You have worked at the school for the last seven years and you have true admiration and respect for the school's leaders. You are deeply committed to the school's mission of providing the best possible education and avenue of opportunity for the students who otherwise struggle in their environment.

You are Fairtown's resident social worker – the only one. Because of the size of the school and the characteristics of its student population, you simply cannot manage the size of the caseload of students with behavioral problems. You truly love your work and you are deeply committed to helping the students most in need, but you can seldom engage in the type of therapeutic work that students need because you are constantly called in to intervene in classrooms where a student is presenting behavioral issues. On top of a caseload much too large for a single individual, you are in charge of keeping track of all the administrative paperwork that is required to document how the school deals with children with behavioral issues. This is critical because it is the only way to guarantee that your students will receive the care they need and also to legally protect the school. You are obviously spread too thin and you receive little support. The school's leadership recognizes your work and acknowledges your situation, but they are also limited in how much actual support they can give you by the school's precarious economic reality – which you fully understand.

One of your biggest challenges this academic year is a student named Damian Gutierrez. He is six years old, lives with his working single mother, and is mostly raised by his maternal grandparents who are from Puerto Rico and who don't speak English.

Since the beginning of the school year, Damian has been constantly oppositional and defiant towards his teacher – Chris Michaels – and verbally and physically aggressive towards his peers. At least twice a week Damian will have an outburst and throw furniture around the room, yell profanities in English and Spanish, sing inappropriate songs with strong sexual content, or run around the room hitting and slapping other students. Every time he does this Chris has to stop the lesson, ask the students to engage in an alternative activity to keep them focused, and manage Damian to keep him away from hurting himself or others. Chris will normally call the main office, which locates you so you can go into the classroom and, with the help of a behavioral technician who is trained in physical restraining, take Damian to a safe space where he can calm down.

For the past six months, Chris has constantly requested the school's administration to remove Damian from the classroom and place him in a special education group. It is likely that Damian has special needs that cannot be met in a regular classroom environment. More important, his behavior has an extremely negative impact on the rest of the children because it constantly interrupts their learning, exposes them to examples of terrible behavior, and often disturbs them emotionally. Both Ms. Conti and Ms. Rivera agree that Damian's needs would be better met in a special education classroom, but they are also bound by state law, which defines a series of steps that must be met for a student to be moved to a special needs program. The typical protocol, which requires a detailed set of educational and psychological evaluations, takes several months as it has to be reviewed by the Board of Education. It will probably lead to Damian's move to a different classroom, but your experience tells you it will not happen before the end of the school year, which is still several months away. Chris is clearly not happy about this and has probably reached a limit in dealing with Damian.

There is a second option, which is an expedited process reserved for true emergencies. This second protocol would allow the school to place Damian in special education in only a few weeks. The protocol requires a psychological evaluation and a well-documented behavioral chart, which would describe Damian's typical behavior by tracking it in detail, in journal fashion, for a week. At a staff meeting a few weeks ago, someone

proposed this alternative protocol for Damian and Ms. Conti said she would be willing to consider it if everything lined up.

You have much experience with the bureaucratic side of special education, so you know that the behavioral chart has to be crafted meticulously, with the level of detail that only a teacher who interacts with a student daily for a prolonged period of time can provide. For this reason, the protocol explicitly mandates that a teacher has to write the behavioral chart. Chris, however, has constantly refused to work on the chart – even though Chris is the one who has asked for Damian to be removed from the classroom. Chris argues not feeling qualified to prepare the chart because of the clinical terminology required and because Chris' class is already behind in the term. Chris has therefore hinted many times that you should prepare the chart. This is just a misconception, as the chart does *not* require clinical language, it just requires a *teacher's* detailed description of a child's behavior.

Regardless, you simply don't have the time to work on the behavioral chart because Damian is only one of more than fifty students you need to work with every week, and frankly, you know that it is not your job. Nevertheless, in one of the many conversations you have had with Chris about Damian you felt bad about Chris and you agreed to provide some support. You agreed that Chris should work listing Damian's behavior with as much detail as possible and that, based on that work, you would create a chart with the appropriate language and format. It was a tense interaction. Chris was clearly upset about doing any extra work and you were not happy about taking in the extra commitment given how busy you already are.

In fact, there have been a series of incidents between you and Chris. You can think of at least five other student cases (one this academic year, the others from previous years) where Chris has asked for social worker assistance in ways that you don't think are necessarily appropriate. You even joked once with a common friend that maybe Chris was just calling you whenever classroom work got difficult. This common friend told you that Chris often complains that you should keep the difficult students under better control and that you clearly have not helped any of these students improve which implies that you might not be good in what you do. You find this insulting both because you take pride in your work as a social worker – you are often offered other jobs – and because the only reason you don't work more closely with children is because of how many students need your help. In fact, Ms. Conti always says that you it is remarkable how much you help children given how little time you have.

When Damian had a particularly bad outburst last week Chris asked you whether you had made progress on the behavioral chart so Damian could enter the expedited protocol soon. Chris once again emphasized that Damian's situation in the classroom was sustainable and that it was urgent to take action. Surprised, you said that of course no progress had been made because only the teacher can create a behavioral chart and you were still waiting for Chris to do the first part you both agreed upon. You reminded Chris that you only agreed to modify and supervise work after Chris did it. You were also tired and agitated after dealing with Damian, so you told Chris: "if you think Damian urgently needs to be moved, then you need to "suck it up" and do the work to make that happen and stop blaming Damian for everything that goes wrong in your classroom."

Chris became enraged and made some caustic comments:

I will not have my teaching questioned by anyone! I have been teaching for more than 15 years and the last time I checked there was a "Best Teacher of the Year" award on my desk. I am the only one who truly knows what happens in my classroom and I will be damned if you will come in and tell me how to do my work. You have made my life miserable for months! You sneak around my back and talk shit about me because you want to do less work. You don't give me the help I need and, frankly, you clearly don't care about Damian. You only care about doing less work. I am alone in dealing with him and my other 35 students. I cannot work like this, or with you, so you can shove your behavioral chart and I want to make it clear that Damian will no longer be present in my classroom, so help me God! So deal with THAT!

After this Chris left the school and went home. You were disturbed by the interaction but you were especially concerned about Damian, so you immediately called Cal Jameson. Cal is an outpatient psychologist who you respect and who works with Fairtown students, including Damian. Cal is a talented, respectful, and committed clinician who is very familiar with Damian's case and gets along with both you and Chris. You asked Cal to set up a meeting with Chris to discuss Damian's case, and Chris agreed.

It is Monday morning and this is the last week of class before recess, which also closes the window to submit Damian's case through the expedited protocol. A delay would keep Damian in the classroom for the rest of the year, which, frankly, would not be the end of the world for you.

Neither Cal nor Chris have any authority over you, but you would much rather meet with them than involve Ms. Conti or Ms. Rivera. Cal is a reasonable person and might be able to reason with Chris. You are very committed to your clinical work with all your students and you want to keep focusing on that. Chris may be an expert teacher, but is no expert in the bureaucracy of mental health. On the flip side, you may know how to handle students in a crisis, but you are less familiar with classroom dynamics. Chris's threat to keep Damian out of the classroom is not just hot air. Chris could technically call school administration every morning and formally request social work intervention, which would force you to take him away daily and would make it impossible for you to work on your other cases.

For you to work on Damian's behavioral chart you would have to pause most of your clinical work for a week and devote at least two days to observing him in the classroom. This would mean that the rest of your students would not receive the support they need this week, aside from the fact that you know that this is *not* what is mandated by the protocol.

Your goal for this meeting is to get Chris to finally agree to work on the behavioral chart so you can put Damian on the expedited protocol. It will imply a couple of days' work for Chris and it will make everyone's life much easier. If you both don't reach an agreement, the case will be taken up to Ms. Rivera who will probably disapprove of how the entire situation was handled and will mandate one of you to do the work.