

Role of Cal Jameson

-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 an outpatient psychologist with a permanent office at Fairtown. Because of the size of the school and the characteristics of its student population, you have a full case load of patients referred by the school. To provide the support that the students need, you work in close collaboration with teachers and with the school's resident social worker, Jean Francis.

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 Jean who then goes into the classroom and, with the help of a behavioral technician who is trained in physical restraining, takes 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.

Jean is in charge of managing all the paperwork around the students' mental health for the school. Jean has much experience with the bureaucratic side of special education, and has told you 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 Jean should prepare the chart. This is a misconception, as the chart does not truly require clinical language, it just requires a teacher's detailed description of a child's behavior. What is true, however, is that Chris feels very responsible for the rest of the students and has appropriately prioritized keeping the rest of the students on track.

You are not sure how things played out, but you know that in one of the many conversations Chris and Jean had about Damian they agreed to collaborate on the behavioral chart. You saw them both after the conversation, so you know that it was a tense interaction – but they had slightly differing accounts about who was supposed to do what. Chris was clearly upset about doing any extra work and Jean was not happy about taking in the extra commitment given how busy things already are.

In fact, there have been a series of incidents between Jean 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. Chris and Jean have clearly disagreed on whether an external intervention was appropriate or necessary. You have heard both express frustration about each other. You have heard gossip from a friend who they both have in common suggesting that they often hint that they question each other's abilities. This surely makes things harder, as they are both highly capable and they both find much pride in their work.

When Damian had a particularly bad outburst last week Chris asked Jean whether Jean 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, Jean said that of course no progress had been made because only the teacher can create a behavioral chart. Jean then 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. Jean immediately called you because you know Damian's case well, both Chris and Jean respect you, and you have excellent relationships with both. Jean asked you to set up a meeting with Chris to discuss Damian's case, so you called Chris 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 you know would be devastating for Chris and probably not a big deal for Jean.

You have no formal authority in the school, but you know that both Jean and Chris would much rather find a solution than involve Ms. Conti or Ms. Rivera. You hope that you can help mediate the conversation and find a common ground.

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, Jean may know how to handle students in a crisis, but is 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 Jean to take him away daily and would make it impossible for Jean to work on other cases.

What is clear is that *someone* has to take the lead in crafting the behavioral chart. You can see how both Jean and Chris have legitimate points to make, but one of them will have to agree to do some extra work. The work will require one of them to put some of their work aside to spend at least two days focusing on Damian's behavior and describe it in detail. This will require a sacrifice, probably from both of them. Aside from playing a mediation role, there is little you can do or offer. The only thing you can think of is that your parent organization (you are formally affiliated with a large Healthcare Organization that partners with schools like Fairtown) gives you a modest yearly budget for "school relations." You had planned to use that money to organize an event with all the teachers and school administrators to celebrate the coming holidays. You *could* possibly offer some money to pay one of them for the extra hours of work required to craft the chart. You could even use some of the budget to hire an external clinician to help them – but they would still need to sacrifice some of their time. Obviously, you would prefer not to even mention that this budget is available to you.

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 they 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 them to do the work.