

INTRODUCTION

Heavier Than Heavy

Elementary schools in the morning have a special kind of feeling. It comes from the way the sunlight hits the art hanging on the walls as it streams through the windows. It comes from the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting from the faculty room. It comes from students streaming into a classroom, filled with the anticipation of a new day. It comes from these features along with a million others, and that special feeling was in full force one early May morning.

Ms. Delphi entered the school that morning as she always had: arms tangled with a water bottle, coffee mug, purse, and tote bag. She exited her car by expertly nudging the car door shut with her hips. Like most educators entering schools, she bore more of a resemblance to a wizened sherpa than a paraprofessional in special education. As she walked the halls of her school and entered the special education classroom, she was greeted with smiles from both students and staff. As Ms. Delphi and the students began their routines, she noticed one of her students named Lizzie was not in her seat when the bell rang. She made the simple verbal demand of “Lizzie, please come sit down,” not knowing it would set off a chain reaction resulting in her receiving a concussion and what the ER doctors would later diagnose as a “bruise behind the eye.”

In response to Ms. Delphi’s request, Lizzie shouted a defiant “NO!” and bolted outside of the special education classroom into the hallways of the school. Her misbehaviors had been escalating over the past few weeks, and she had been the subject of several specialists who came to class and observed, assessed, and theorized about Lizzie. The results of their observations were of the familiar sort: “The function of Lizzie’s behavior is to escape unwanted demands and/or activities,” etc. As helpful as

these observations were, they did little in this moment of need. Lizzie's parents had been involved, but they too felt at a loss when it came to her behavior.

Ms. Delphi calmly followed Lizzie down the hallway. Lizzie found her classroom down the second-grade hallway, and with the agility of a baseball player sliding into home, she dove beneath a cluster of desks. Upon entering the classroom, Ms. Delphi deftly made eye contact with the classroom teacher, communicating she was there to help. Lizzie's classmates looked on, but not intently. They had seen Lizzie engage in strange and unusual behavior before. It was the end of the year, and they had gotten used to her antics.

While Lizzie giggled at this cat-and-mouse game, there was something moody and manic about these particular chuckles—they communicated more chaos than joy. Ms. Delphi crouched down to appraise the situation up close, but before she could react, Lizzie rocked back and kicked a desk directly into Ms. Delphi's face.

The velocity and all the weight of the desk struck Ms. Delphi just above her nose. Lizzie shrieked-laughed just as the entire class gasped in shock. Lizzie's teacher called the front office, and they responded by helping Ms. Delphi to her feet and escorting Lizzie back to her special education classroom.

That's when I was called.

Every time I get a call like this my stomach sinks. It sinks for the Ms. Delphis, it sinks for the principals, it sinks for the teams, it sinks for the parents, and it sinks for the children. It's heavy—it's heavier than heavy. When human safety is impacted in such a serious way, it's like a meteor crashing into the planet. The ripple of the crash triggers a chain reaction of despair, frustration, and fear in school teams. This chain reaction doesn't always result in our best decision-making efforts, and it almost always—and understandably—negatively affects morale. However, it is somewhere within this chain of despair, frustration, and fear where we want to introduce our approach. It is in this chain where we must attempt to accept what is happening and move forward to support all those affected. We do not enter this chain with silly “turn-that-frown-upside-down” positivity. Yet we also do not enter this chain with “the-sky-is-falling” doomsday vibes, either. We enter this chain genuinely caring about the team.

So how does one enter this chain reaction of despair, frustration, and fear? Well, we never enter this chain alone. We do so with a team, and we do so with a healthy dose of optimism. Yet our brand of optimism is not just an attitude to look on the bright side (because let's be real: What is the bright side of

suffering a concussion and a bruise behind the eye?). Our brand of optimism is grounded. Our brand of optimism accepts all the nonsense and absurdity we face as public educators. Our brand of optimism is a strategy—a strategy where school team safety is the centerpiece.

It's been over a year since Ms. Delphi suffered her injury and she, her school team, and Lizzie are all flourishing and safe. This book is our best effort to share how our teams have helped in this scenario and many others. We will share the steps we take to rebuild and regroup in the aftermath of those destructive meteors of student behavior problems. Of course, this type of work is never truly done and there are ups and downs along the way—it's inevitable. Educating and rearing children is inconvenient work. In other words, there's nothing convenient about our approach. It should come as no surprise that optimistic teaming is hard work. You know as well as we do to be wary of any approach promising to be "easy" or "simple" when human beings are involved. However, there are practical steps within optimistic teaming designed to make this hard work more doable and more sustainable for you and your teams. We're in the teaming business. We're in the "it takes a village" business. We're not looking for "buy-in"; we're looking for teammates. Would you like to join the team? We hope so.

Do not copy, post, or distribute