



Middle School Student Suspended For Hugging Teacher

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After his teacher stepped in to break up a fight between himself and another student, Ryan Blackmon, an eighth grade student at Bladenboro Middle School in North Carolina, embraced his teacher and gave her a hug to show his gratitude. This action, of giving his teacher a hug, has led to his suspension from Bladenboro Middle School.

According to Ryan, “I said thank you after she got done. I went to hug her, and then she just *snatched* me up by the arm and drug [sic] me to the other teacher and said I needed to be written up, and that something serious had happened.” Both Ryan and Ryan’s parents are outraged by the teacher’s conduct and the suspension. Specifically, Ryan “does not understand how she could have felt threatened when I was just showing my gratitude. She could have politely told me to move away.” Ryan’s parents have filed a police report against the teacher and the school because the teacher’s grip left marks on Ryan’s arm.

On the other hand, it is against the school’s disciplinary policy to hug a teacher and hugging a teacher is classified as a Level II offense. The teacher argues that in addition to Ryan violating the school’s ban on hugging, Ryan had “hugged her with a tight grip” and therefore, her actions of grabbing him by the arm, writing him up, and suspending him from school are all warranted.

This is not the first case where a student was suspended for hugging a teacher that has come to light in the past few years. In 2006, a four-year old student in New Jersey was suspended after hugging his teacher’s aide. A school district in Florida has also instituted a “no hugging” rule between teachers and students. The Superintendent of Schools for the Matawan Aberdeen Regional School District in Florida supports the ban because “as a building principal, one has broad discretion in terms of maintaining order in his/her building and therefore based on the observed and reported excessive hugging/physical contact, that, at times, may have been inappropriate and causing delays, it is for the good of the school that hugging is banned.”

In light of the recent cases involving the interaction between students and teachers, new and prospective teachers need to be given advice about how to speak with students and address these situations. If your institution has questions or concerns about this topic and you would like further information, please email Jim Ryan at jryan@cullenanddykman.com or call him at 516-357-3750. A special thanks to Hayley Dryer, a third-year law student at Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, for helping with this post.