

Case Study: Marvin and Michael

Marvin and Michael are both sophomores at Southwest High School. The two boys got themselves into trouble during spirit week, a time in the school year when students often demonstrate extra school spirit. School sanctioned activities such as placing empty trash cans upside down with signs positioned under the cans that read *Southwest Dragons Rule* or posting *We Are Winners* signs to designated bulletin boards are common. Defacing school property with written or painted messages or images is explicitly forbidden, and school staff are careful to remind students of that fact each year during school announcements at the start of spirit week.

Marvin and Michael, who sit next to each other in biology and share an interest in illustration, started a drawing of a dragon, passing it back and forth so that each of them added details. After finishing the drawing, they decided to meet Saturday evening to recreate it on the back, exterior wall of the school, which faces a wooded area. Another student overheard their planning and told them that it was not a good idea, and that they would be punished, but doing it would make them school legends.

Marvin and Michael met as planned, covering a large portion of the exterior wall with a black and red image of a dragon. On Monday, the drawing was discovered, and the identity of the artists revealed. Marvin was given a notice of expulsion, and Michael was suspended for two weeks.

The disparity in the treatment of the two was reported to the district superintendent who got involved and reduced the penalty given to Marvin to suspension. The school's principal and faculty were very upset with the superintendent's decision. Marvin, they explained in a written request to allow the principal's decision to stand, is a constant trouble-maker. His suspension record revealed a history of cutting class, mouthing off at teachers, fighting, and he was suspected of taking a teacher's wallet from her desk drawer. Michael, the faculty explained, is a good kid. He sometimes says inappropriate things, but he thinks that he is being clever. Michael has no suspension record.

More to Consider:

Mrs. Tate, a fairly new principal in the district, was an English teacher who went into administration. She was raised by a single no-nonsense mom who worked very hard to send three daughters to college. Mrs. Tate's mom instilled in her girls the importance of making good decisions and heeding the caution that *rules are rules*. Mrs. Tate is African American.

Marvin is being raised by a single mom. He is a tall guy and wants to play basketball, but he can't stay for practice because he goes home after school to watch his younger sister until their mom gets home from work. Marvin is African American.

Michael is also being raised by a single mom. He is typically quiet, stays to himself and draws during most classes. His mom has met with his homeroom teacher to express concern that Michael doesn't seem to have friends and maybe feels like an outsider because he is mixed race.