




OFFICE OF P-12 EDUCATION: Office of Special Education
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER
Room 301M EB, 89 Washington Avenue • Albany, NY 12234
www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/

Telephone (518) 402-3353
Fax: (518) 402-3534

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SPECIAL EDUCATION FIELD ADVISORY

FROM: James P. DeLorenzo 

SUBJECT: Health and Safety Precautions for Students with Disabilities

Tragically, a young student with autism wandered from his school building during the school day in New York City and remains missing. In light of this, I would like to take this opportunity to remind all public and private schools serving students with disabilities of the importance of ensuring that they have school-wide policies and protocols in place to address, prevent and respond to elopement instances such as this.

For students with disabilities, each committee on preschool special education or committee on special education must identify if the student has behaviors that impede his or her learning or that of others. This should include a consideration of whether a student has the tendency to wander or elope and, if so, to ensure that a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) of the behavior is conducted and that the behavior is addressed through proper supervision and through an individualized behavior intervention plan based on the results of the FBA.

In addition, schools should ensure that there are building policies, procedures and protocols in place to prevent and address instances of wandering and elopement, particularly for students with cognitive impairments. These should include, but are not limited to, the following.

- Staff training on awareness and response
- Supervisory notification and 911 calls
- Communication protocols with local police
- Use of school-wide communication and alert systems
- Preassignments for building and ground searches
- Procedures for assuring that crisis response and law enforcement officials have access to floor plans, blueprints, schematics or other maps of the school interior, school grounds and road maps of the immediate surrounding area
- Immediate family notification

- Identification of students with known elopement behaviors to local building principals, hall monitors, and security guards
- Consideration of installment of door alarms and use of other elopement warning devices
- Ensuring students with known elopement behaviors carry basic identification information at all times

These procedures should be incorporated into each school's school safety building plan, as appropriate. For more information on school safety building plan requirements, see <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/ssae/schoolsafety/save/#schoolsafetyplans>.

The Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner Slentz have asked the District Superintendents of each Board of Cooperative Educational Services to engage their component districts in a dialogue on this issue to identify current practices and to consider the need for further guidance and/or policy changes. For technical assistance or professional development on behavioral assessments and interventions, please contact the Regional Special Education Technical Assistance Support Center in your region of the State (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/techassist/rsetasc/locations.htm>). For specific technical assistance for students with autism, you may contact the Center for Autism and Related Disorders (<http://www.albany.edu/autism/>).

Thank you for your timely attention to this matter.

c: John B. King, Jr.
Ken Slentz