

What happened?

Trevyan

TEEN WITH AUTISM WALKED AWAY FROM SCHOOL WITHOUT ANYONE NOTICING His death points to RCSD's special ed issues

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Of all the outstanding questions regarding the death of 14-year-old Trevyan Rowe, one is fundamental: How did he walk away from school without anyone noticing?

Trevyan, a teen with autism, got off the bus at James P.B. Duffy School 12 on Thursday morning but, rather than going to class, walked off on South Avenue and eventually to the Genesee River, where he apparently died from drowning.

It is difficult to say what procedures School 12 and the Rochester City School District were supposed to have followed in Trevyan's case, as the district has released few details and the specifics of Trevyan's disability are unknown.

It is also unclear whether any changes to procedures have been made since the events surrounding Trevyan's disappearance.

District spokesman Carlos Garcia said Monday afternoon that an internal review did uncover new information, but the district wants to share those details with the Rowe family before making them public.

“And the family is grieving, and we are respecting their

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grieving process,” he said. “The bottom line is that we have a mother here who lost her child and out of respect for her and the family, we are not providing any other information until we are able to touch base with the family.”

Garcia said that while the district will have representatives at a vigil planned Monday night in Trevyan’s memory, Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams would not be attending. He said that as soon as possible, Deane-Williams and Board of Education President Van White plan to talk with the Rowe family.

Garcia did not address other questions about the district’s policies and procedures.

In general, though, the district for years has struggled to maintain many of the systems designed to keep children like Trevyan safe.

In particular, it has been cited regularly over the last several years for failing to conduct necessary behavioral reviews and action plans, including at School 12.

A survey in the summer of 2015 showed that School 12 had only conducted the behavioral assessment for one out of the seven students who needed one. That one assessment was not compliant with state law, the district determined, and in any case did not result in a behavioral improvement plan as is required.

“When the state came in 2014-15, we couldn’t find some kids’ BIPs,” Christopher Suriano, then the district’s special education director, said in 2016. “We just couldn’t locate them.”

The situation was similar at many other schools in Rochester. Suriano has since been promoted to the top special education job in the state Education Department.

The district said it had subsequently cleaned up its record on those procedures. A wide-ranging special education review in April 2017, though, showed that some confusion existed among staff as far as what assessments were needed when.

The consultant, Judy Elliott, also recommended the district hire or train a behavioral analyst to work with its autism team and to add at least four additional full-time, district-level positions in autism.

“Given the size of the district and the steady increase of students with autism, it is striking that there are only two personnel to work district-wide,” she wrote.

As recently as December, at the inaugural meeting of the Special Education Parent Advisory Council, several parents raised concerns about their children not getting behavioral assessments as required.

More generally, the district’s special education department has spent the year under siege and currently has no director. The former leader, Teresa Wood, quit abruptly last month, saying, “My integrity would not allow me to continue.”

State guidance on ‘wandering’

In October 2013, a 14-year-old boy with autism named Avonte Oquendo dashed from his school in New York City before anyone could stop him. A frantic search lasted 104 days, ending only when his remains were dredged up from the East River.

The boy's death led to a statewide effort to prevent similar tragedies from occurring elsewhere in New York.

Before Avonte had even been found, the state Education Department issued a memo to all school districts urging them to update and review their policies around "wandering and elopement," particularly with regard to children with autism.

"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," wrote John King, then the state education commissioner.

He listed a number of steps school districts should take to keep wandering students safe, including training staff and making them aware of which students might wander; developing search and communication protocols in advance, including with local police; and considering door alarms or other warning devices.

Those are all building-level strategies that, King wrote, should be incorporated into a school's building safety plan.

It is not clear whether such plans were in place at School 12. The state Education Department did confirm the school had filed a school safety plan for 2017-18, as required.

The document itself is confidential, though, as it also contains details about how the school and police anticipate responding to an active shooter or other emergencies.

"We are deeply saddened by the tragic death of Trevyan Rowe and the troubling circumstances surrounding his disappearance," department spokeswoman Emily DeSantis wrote in a statement. "We are in contact with the Rochester City School District and are closely monitoring the investigation to determine what happened and what actions need to be taken to ensure a similar tragedy never happens again."

In general, the determination for whether Trevyan or any other student is considered a risk to wander or elope would have been made by his Committee on Special Education and memorialized in his individualized educational plan, the document that governs every aspect of a child with a disability's education.

Importantly, that individualized playbook should include a functional behavioral assessment, which analyzes whether certain difficult behaviors — from wandering and eloping to violent acts — are due to the child's disability. If they are, the Committee on Special Education must then adopt a behavioral improvement plan, which includes details on how the school will react to the student's behaviors.

For a child who wanders, that would include details of the school's supervisory responsibilities. Some children are escorted from the school bus to the front door; others are trusted to make their own way.

If Trevyan had been identified as likely to wander, with safeguards in his IEP and an accompanying behavioral improvement plan — all assumptions, none confirmed — then his escape after getting off the bus Thursday morning would represent a massive failure by the adults entrusted to care for him.

"You can have the best system in the world and things will fall through the cracks," Dan DeMarle, a local special education expert, said. "But you want to have redundant systems so if something goes wrong in the first one, you get it with the second one. That's important with fragile kids, or kids in need, to make sure they don't get hurt."

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Trevyan Rowe provided