

# THE MORAL LIBERAL

## Why Would School Staff Force a Student to Freeze?

JASON BEDRICK, CATO INSTITUTE

It seems mind-boggling. Minnesota public school staff forced a barefoot teenage girl in a wet bathing suit to stand outside in sub-zero weather until she developed frostbite.

It happened around 8:30 a.m. Wednesday at Como Park High School in St. Paul. Fourteen-year-old Kayona Hagen-Tietz says she was in the school's pool when the fire alarm went off.

While other students had gotten out earlier and were able to put on dry clothes, Hagen-Tietz said she was rushed out with just her towel.

On Wednesday morning, the temperature was 5 below, and the wind chill was 25 below.

A teacher prevented her from getting her clothes from her locker because the rules stipulate that everyone must immediately leave the building in the event of a fire alarm. Shivering, the student pleaded to be allowed to go inside a car or another building but her request was denied.

Hagen-Tietz asked to wait inside an employee's car, or at the elementary school across the street. But administrators believed that this would violate official policy, and could get the school in trouble, so they opted to simply let the girl freeze.

Students huddled around her and a teacher gave her a coat, but she stood barefoot for ten minutes before obtaining permission to sit in a vehicle. By that point, she had already developed frostbite.

How can something like this happen? Public choice theory offers an important insight: even in the public sector, people tend to act in their own self-interest and respond to incentives.

In this case, each of the rules makes perfect sense in the abstract. The fire alarm may signal a real danger so exiting the building with alacrity is essential. Likewise, rules about keeping students on school property and out of adults' vehicles reflect legitimate concerns about student safety. And yet, in enforcing these safety rules rigidly in an extreme case where they should not apply, the teachers and administrators violated the rules' very intention.

Government schools and their employees are not held accountable to parents, but to bureaucrats and their top-down rules. No doubt the school staff were well-intentioned—they recognized the harm this girl was suffering and almost certainly wanted to help her—but they were more afraid of violating the rules. Though the rules were written to protect students, in this case the rules were inimical to a student's well-being, yet the staff still chose compliance over common sense.

No school is perfect—no human institution is—but incidences like these are much less likely to occur when schools are held directly accountable to parents. The only way to make government

schools directly accountable to parents, as their private counter-parts already are, is to enact educational choice programs that empower parents to vote with their (non-frostbitten) feet.