

Autistic Boy Slipped Through Cracks And Out Door to Death

By SARAH DORSEY | Posted: Monday, March 31, 2014 5:15 pm

Avonte Oquendo, the 14-year-old autistic student who died after running away from his Long Island City school last October, may have managed to escape in part because a warning from his mother to watch him because he “likes to run” wasn’t shared widely enough by his Teacher, according to city investigators.

Special Schools Commissioner of Investigation Richard J. Condon March 27 also reported that a School Safety Agent saw Avonte darting from a stairwell across the first floor of P.S. 277, the Riverview School, just before he ran out. But though she yelled to him, she was distracted by the arrival of another student and believed she saw him heading back upstairs. He actually ducked out another door and onto the street.

Remains Washed Up

Avonte’s picture was posted in subways and on buildings across the city for three months after his disappearance, until his remains were found in the East River in January. He was severely autistic and could not speak.

Mr. Condon’s report describes a series of distractions that made Avonte’s escape last Oct. 4 possible. The investigator declined to recommend any disciplinary action in the case, but forwarded his findings to Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña and the Queens District Attorney.

Avonte’s special-education school was housed in a building with four other schools, none of which cater to special-needs children. He slipped away while the Teacher of another class and two Paraprofessionals were leading several students down a stairwell from the cafeteria to another classroom during their lunch break.

Avonte’s Special-Education Teacher, Julie Murray, acknowledged that at the beginning of the school year, she created a form and sent it to parents asking for information to get to know each child better. Avonte’s mother responded to a section on “Questions or concerns,” writing, “Safety concerns—Please make sure you keep an eye out he likes to run. Need 1-1 supervisor will leave the building.”

Didn’t Tell Administrators

The Teacher told investigators that she took special precautions to keep Avonte from running out of the classroom, and advised her classroom Paraprofessionals about the warning. (One of them

confirmed those facts to investigators.) Ms. Murray didn't inform the administration, however.

The school Principal, Susan McNulty, said Teachers were told not to send anything to parents without administrator approval, but Ms. Murray said she didn't remember learning of that rule.

As the group of students and staff made its way downstairs on Oct. 4, Ms. Murray was taking her own scheduled lunch break. Each of the two Paraprofessionals in the bunch was dealing with a student that needed extra attention, and both wound up lagging behind the rest. The Teacher leading the group said he had been focusing throughout lunch on a third student who needed extra attention. That student was rushing down the stairs, and the two were ahead of the others.

There were only two School Safety Agents in the building, and one of them, Bernadette Perez, was seated at the main security desk on the ground floor at the time. She said she was signing in a parent when she saw the young man she later learned was Avonte in the lobby near the stairwell. She claims she called, "Excuse me" twice, but said she could not leave her post to chase after him. She told investigators that she didn't know who Avonte was or that he was a special-needs student.

Stranger Left Door Open

Just then, Ms. Perez said, a girl who was heading home sick with her father approached the Safety Agent and hugged her. (Security cameras confirmed that a child and an adult were interacting with the SSA at the desk as Avonte was running through the lobby.) Ms. Perez recalled seeing him head back into the stairwell, though in fact, he ran down a hallway and out an open door. A man was later caught on school security cameras leaving the door open a few minutes earlier, but though several contractors were asked about it, the man was never identified.

The report also notes that an Acting Principal who was in charge of the building because Ms. McNulty was away declined to lock down the school right away and sweep the halls for stray students after learning Avonte was missing, concerned that it would alarm the other students. But by then, Avonte had likely already run down the street.

The two Paraprofessionals with Avonte in the stairwell say they were never told that he was a "runner." The Principal had no instructions on file that he should be assigned one-on-one supervision.

United Federation of Teachers spokeswoman Alison Gendar said the union is reviewing the report, but could not comment further on an open investigation.

'A Lack of Communication'

Teamsters Local 237 President Gregory Floyd, who represents School Safety Agents, said the

issue was reflective of a larger problem.

“The report illustrates the lack of communication between school officials and School Safety Agents,” he said in an interview. “[Agents] should be made aware of which individuals should be closely watched.”

“The child unfortunately was dressed like any other child, and there was no way of knowing he was a special-needs child. And this is going on in the buildings that house both special-needs children and other children.”