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What the Law Allows

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What the Law Allows

Teacher liability is a topic of current interest. Listed below are some cases in which science teachers have been sued for liability. Assuming that you are a member of a jury and have been given all relevant facts, which cases would you award a verdict of guilty? For the verdicts actually given, consult the answers at the end of the article.

1. A biology teacher requested a student to bring a glass beaker from the back of the room to his demonstration table. The student slipped and fell, receiving serious wounds from the broken beaker.
2. A student in a chemistry laboratory injured himself while inserting a piece of glass tubing into a rubber stopper. The teacher had previously demonstrated, and properly instructed, all the students about the method and danger involved. A student attempted to force the glass tubing into the stopper and was injured when the tubing snapped and went through the palm of his hand.
3. During a physics laboratory, a teacher stepped out of the classroom for a few minutes to obtain a reference book from the library. In his absence a serious accident occurred.
4. On a field trip, a science teacher led his students across a precarious looking footbridge. The bridge collapsed causing serious injury to several students.
5. A teacher asked two students to clean a chemical stockroom, warning them of an unlabelled jar of acid on a high shelf. A scuffle caused the acid to fall and the students were seriously burned.
6. A student was sent to the drugstore in his own car to purchase some hydrogen peroxide. While returning he hit another car when he ran a red light. He had no insurance and the accident victim sued the teacher.
7. A student was asked to water plants in a greenhouse adjoining a botany classroom. The student carried a glass bottle of water, tried to climb a chair, and was seriously injured when the chair collapsed. The chair was in good repair.
8. Three students in a chemistry class were making up a laboratory exercise on the preparation and properties of oxygen. The teacher told them to gather the materials necessary for the experiment and follow the safety directions in the write-up. Contrary to the directions, the students mixed potassium chlorate with red phosphorous and ferric oxide and heated them with a Bunsen burner. An explosion resulted and several students were injured.

Answers: The jury voted guilty in cases 3, 4, 6 and 8.

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