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Innovation in Science Education

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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Innovation in Science Education

Innovation in Science Educaton-World-Wide, by Albert V. Baez, has been published by Unesco Press with the purpose of promoting improvements in science education-worldwide, but particularly in developing countries. After reviewing the present situation and the directions in which improvements might be sought, it describes the lessons learned from some recent efforts to improve science education, analyzes some promising trends, discusses areas for priority action, and proposes some strategies for change. Included is an annotated bibliography of 101 references. The book is addressed to all those in a position to make an effective contribution to the improvement of science education. Order from Unesco Press, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75700, Paris, France.