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CHEMISTRY TEACHER "FROZE IN PURE SHOCK" AFTER BOTCHED EXPERIMENT SET TEEN ON FIRE

Atlanta, Georgia — A teacher presenting a flashy demonstration to get her students excited about chemistry made a mistake that caused a fire to burn "out of control" and seriously injure a student, says a report released Wednesday. The high school teacher, Bridgette Blowe, "froze in pure shock" when it grew out of control, spread across the desk and set her student — in the front row — on fire, according to students and staff, CBS Atlanta affiliate WGCL-TV reports.



In this September 12, 2019 photo, Malachi McFadden, 16, who suffered serious burns during a chemistry class demonstration on August 6, poses for a photo at his lawyer's office, in Atlanta. AP

Staff and students said the student, 16-year-old Malachi McFadden, had his head down and didn't see the flame coming. He suffered third-degree burns on his face, neck and torso and was hospitalized after the botched "burning money demonstration," which happened at Redan High School, just outside Atlanta, on the second day of his junior year, his lawyers said.

On Wednesday, his lawyers released a report by an investigator for the DeKalb County school system that uses witness statements from students and teachers to piece together what happened August 6. They say Blowe didn't provide protective equipment or advise the boy to stand 10 feet away, as mandated, WGCL-TV reported.

Blowe, 36, wrote in a statement included in the report that she's successfully done the demonstration — lighting an accelerant-soaked bill on fire — in previous years and for two other

classes this year. In this particular class, the flame didn't burn out completely, Blowe wrote, "so I attempted to extinguish the flame with water, but I reached for the alcohol instead, by mistake."

The report dated October 21 said Blowe violated district standards and that Regional Superintendent Sean Tarrt recommended Blowe be fired, but Principal Janice Boger recommended she be suspended and receive training on classroom safety.

The school district said Wednesday Blowe is on administrative leave with pay, that no disciplinary action has been taken and the district is "reviewing training and safety protocols for its science labs."

Boger called Blowe a good teacher who "made an awful mistake."

L. Chris Stewart, a lawyer for McFadden, said they will likely end up suing for damages to cover his pain and suffering, as well as past and future medical costs, including plastic surgery. "The only thing for them to do is to accept responsibility for it," Stewart said of the school district.

The demonstration Blowe was attempting is popular on the internet and the premise is simple: Soak paper money in a mixture of water and alcohol, light it and amaze your friends when the bill comes through unharmed. But numerous videos also show the experiment going horribly wrong.

Blowe had tried to do the experiment the first day of classes using a mixture of water and alcohol, but it didn't work, according to witness statements. She tried again the next day using a mixture of water and ethanol. After soaking a \$5 bill and lighting it, she put it in a bowl and "added more ethanol to make the flame bigger," the investigator concluded. That "caused the flame to become out of control."

Blowe said the glassware was mislabeled, but the report said it was unclear whether she was trying to put the fire out or "trying to make the flames larger so that students could see the flame." The investigator wrote that it was "inconclusive as to whether or not Ms. Blowe's use of water or alcohol was accidental."

Reached by phone Wednesday, Blowe declined to comment.

McFadden told The Associated Press in a September interview that his hands still hurt constantly and he misses playing baritone saxophone in the band along with playing football and basketball. He hopes to return next semester.

He likes math and wants to be an engineer but has never really liked science. He'll have to take chemistry next year to graduate but said he feels nervous about that.

News outlets across the country have reported about students injured in chemistry class demonstrations in recent years, including one at a Manhattan high school that caused burns over about 31% of a student's body in 2014. In July, a jury awarded that student nearly \$60 million in damages for past and future pain and suffering.

The problem isn't new, said Ken Roy, chief safety compliance adviser for the National Science Teaching Association. There's no national database that tracks such accidents, but Roy said he has anecdotal knowledge of at least 30 since the late 1990s that have ended up in court after students were seriously injured.

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