

Exam question comes under fire; Teachers appalled by gunshot scenario. Physics final uses school shooting for CSI-type puzzle

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Full text:

Question No. 25 on a final physics exam caused a stir yesterday even before students in Quebec's English schools had finished writing the test.

The question on the Grade 11 Physics 534 exam asked students to investigate a virtual crime scene in a school auditorium where a victim lay on the stage with a gunshot wound to the head.

A diagram showed a gingerbread man figure as the victim and four possible suspects - Archie, Patricia, Sandra and Serge - identified by smiley faces.

The question asked students to identify the most likely suspect using the data provided, which included the velocity of a bullet as it leaves the gun and the distance it traveled in the skull.

"I think it's inappropriate, quite frankly," said Kevin Lukian, director general of the Riverside School Board on Montreal's South Shore.

"We want to make questions that kids can relate to. On the other hand - to me - I find it regrettable," Lukian said.

"With everything that we're trying to do these days to counter violence and to make schools safe places, I find it disappointing that there would be a question of this nature. It's not necessary." A Montreal physics teacher called the mechanics of the question "excellent" but felt uncomfortable with the question for high school students. "I was actually taken aback by it, frankly," said the teacher, who asked to remain anonymous. "The very same question could have been put in a different context - a non-violent context." The exam was written by students in public and private English schools in Quebec. It wasn't an Education Department exam. It came from a province-wide committee that looks after math and science issues and is made up of consultants from English school boards in Quebec, said Ken Elliott, director of educational services at the Lester B. Pearson School Board on Montreal's West Island. The committee sets up teams of teachers and consultants to put out exams, Elliott said.

At Marymount Academy, there was some discussion yesterday about whether to remove the question, said Steven Erdelyi, head of the high school's science department. The staff and principal opted not to because the exam was just over halfway through and some students had begun working on the problem. "So we felt it would be unfair to them to pull the question," Erdelyi said.

He was under the impression that some schools yanked the question from the exam while others did not.

At Dawson College, where a gunman opened fire in September 2006, staff no longer use bullets as examples in courses that teach velocity and impact, said spokesperson Donna Varrica. One student was killed and 20 others were injured during the attack. The gunman shot himself to death after being hit by a police bullet.

Varrica said students could have learned from the physics exam exercise in another way without it resorting to a gunshot wound to the head.

"I think its taste is questionable and certainly goes against everything that we've been trying to teach about non-violent communication."

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