

# A parent speaks: Strip searches are never OK

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COPQUIN

Even well before we were worrying about swine flu, we'd reached an era when children are discouraged from touching, hugging, holding hands, kissing or engaging in any sort of physical contact on school grounds. So it's ironic that the U. S. Supreme Court has to determine whether it's OK for schools to conduct the most egregious invasion of personal space imaginable.

This, after a 13-year-old middle-schooler in Arizona was strip searched in 2003 by a school nurse and another employee, under orders of an assistant principal.

They weren't looking for a hidden weapon. Nor were they looking for illegal drugs like heroin, crystal meth or marijuana. Instead, in blankly following their zero-tolerance drug policy, the school administrators were searching for a stash of prescription ibuprofen — basically the equivalent of two Advils.

And all the "evidence" the school had was finger-pointing by another student.

The assistant principal had scoured Savana Redding's backpack, but on finding no trace of illegal drugs there, in a gross overreaction, he sent

her to the nurse's office, where she was instructed to remove her clothing down to her undergarments and then told to expose her breasts and vaginal area. It's important to note that no drugs were found, although that's beside the point.

It is legal for schools to search a student's pocketbook, backpack, locker and even car, if there are reasonable grounds for suspicion. And I fully support all schools, including those here on Long Island, that actively work to make sure their campuses are drug-free and safe for students.

But there must be limits.

While the practice is legal, some schools in New York have been successfully sued in civil courts for conducting strip searches on their students. Back in 2004, the parents of four elementary school students at a public school in the Bronx filed a lawsuit in Federal District Court in Manhattan, after an employee ordered the boys to take off their clothes when a ring was reported miss-



ILLUSTRATION BY SARA SCHWARTZ

ing by their teacher.

And in 1988, a State Supreme Court jury awarded \$125,000 to a teenage girl who was strip searched four years earlier at another Bronx school on suspicion of hiding marijuana.

Savana Redding's mother, who wasn't even called by the

school until well after the incident occurred, sued her daughter's school district on the grounds that the strip search was unreasonable and unconstitutional, since it infringed on her child's Fourth Amendment rights to privacy.

So now the Supreme Court, which heard arguments on the case last week, is weighing the Fourth Amendment as it pertains to the privacy rights of students, versus the rights of the schools to search and seizure practices, so they can protect other students from potential harm.

Should the Supreme Court find in favor of the schools — that for the greater welfare of the campus population, they are entitled to conduct strip searches — I would hope they'd also set up extremely specific criteria to justify them. I

suggest some real evidence, for starters.

Otherwise, what would stop mean girls, school bullies or troublemakers from randomly accusing other students — exactly what happened in Savana's case?

As the parent of a 14-year-

old daughter, I can't imagine any scenario in which drug-related strip searches are a good idea. For once schools have the Supreme Court behind them, who's to say overzealous school personnel at some point may not also feel a compulsion to conduct cavity searches as well?

I generally stand by school policy. But regardless of the decision the Supreme Court reaches, I categorically forbid my daughter's school from ever conducting a strip search on her. I don't know if I can do that legally, but I want it on the record. Knowing my daughter, I seriously doubt this would ever be an issue, but I'm guessing Savana Redding's mother would have thought the same thing. Instead, her honor student daughter was humiliated by school authorities — an experience that caused her to stay home traumatized for months thereafter, before she finally transferred to another school.

If the idea behind the strip search was to keep students safe from harm, this Arizona school failed miserably. Savana was harmed — shamefully violated. And so will other students if the Supreme Court rules in favor of this alarming practice.



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**CORRECTION:** Yesterday's Opinion essay by Jennifer Wheary erroneously stated that the recently passed state budget decreased the amount New Yorkers can deduct on their state taxes for charitable contributions.