

Predictive Algorithm Leads to Student Arrest, Lawsuit, and Uproar

A Local Reporter

A community in your state - In August, a school resource officer tackled and arrested a seventeen-year-old high school student on school grounds after a computer-generated algorithm flagged his social media posts for exhibiting a potential for violence. A school resource officer interrogated him, and the school subsequently expelled the student. The student's name is being withheld due to his age, but he is being referred to as Michael. Michael has no history of violence or misconduct.

The student's parents are threatening to sue the school for unlawful arrest, inappropriate use of unreliable surveillance software, and damages related to the physical and psychological mistreatment of their child. Activists have descended on the high school pressing a variety of issues, and the incident is gaining national attention.

The facts appear to be undisputed. On a Thursday evening two weeks ago, Michael, upset that his friends had recently been in a fight on school grounds, wrote and posted an angry social media statement online that included the claim that his high school was "asking for a shooting, or something."

The post was flagged by a machine-learning algorithm developed by a software company, Southcape. Michael's Public School District signed a contract with Southcape at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars per year to monitor students' social media posts for signs of potentially violent behavior that might threaten school safety.

Michael's post contained language that the algorithm determined was statistically correlated with an elevated likelihood to commit violence. As a result, Southcape's software system sent an alert to the school resource officer assigned to the high school. The alert included a copy of Michael's social media post but did not detail what features in the post triggered the alert.

When Michael arrived at school the following morning at about 8:00 am, School Resource Officer Jordan Taylor detained him at the door and asked to search his backpack. Michael refused to turn over the backpack, insisting the officer "get a warrant."

Several students were present at the time, some of whom filmed parts of the encounter on their cellphones. According to the student observers, when the officer informed Michael that they did not need a warrant and would handcuff him if he continued to refuse to comply, Michael attempted to turn around and leave the school. At that point, Officer Taylor wrestled Michael to the ground, and handcuffed his wrists behind his back, while stating, "If you are going to act like a fool, I am going to treat you like a fool."



The incident occurred at a local high school early this week.

Officer Taylor then searched Michael's backpack. The officer did not find a weapon, but did find marijuana paraphernalia and some marijuana remnants at the bottom of the backpack. Officer Taylor placed the remnants in a plastic bag. According to the students, during the search, Michael continually demanded to be released.

After the search, Officer Taylor led Michael out of school in handcuffs, placed Michael in the back of a police cruiser, and drove off school grounds. According to the Police Department, Michael was not formally arrested but he was questioned about his social media post and ultimately released into the custody of his parents.

That same day, Officer Taylor reported the incident, paraphernalia and marijuana possession, and detention to the high school's Vice Principal. The Vice Principal expelled Michael for violating the school's zero tolerance policy on drug-related activity.

Michael's parents recently announced that they intend to sue the school as part of an effort to rescind Michael's expulsion, end the school's use of the Southcape surveillance tool, and collect damages for their son's mistreatment. When interviewed for this article, Michael's parents emphasized that the school's actions had been triggered by a computer program reacting to a contextless social media post and not by any action taken by Michael.

"Our son is a good kid, and this upending of his life is outrageous," said his father.

Some are now petitioning the school board to end the use of what they're calling "invasive" and "unnecessary" surveillance tools like the Southcape algorithm. While the petition appears to be gaining momentum, not everyone is ready to condemn these practices.

As a concerned local citizen who identified as a

former police officer put it, "I understand why the social media tracker is controversial. However, this is another tool for law enforcement in the growing struggle to protect our children. I am open to any conversation on how to best ensure public safety and how to help students like Michael understand the consequences of his words and receive the mental healthcare he clearly needs."

Here are some of Michael's classmates' reactions, part of our continued coverage on this story.

"I was really worried about Michael after I saw that post," one classmate commented. "He was so mad, and it's like, you just can't say stuff like that with all of the scary things on the news. I feel bad for him, but better safe than sorry."

Another classmate asserted that the school should not be allowed to monitor students' social media without prior notice or initiate law enforcement actions without first talking to the student. Still another described the post as a warning, not a threat, and expressed confusion over why it was treated as violent and why the school officer didn't allow Michael to leave the school.

School officials have yet to comment on the lawsuit or the ongoing petition to end online surveillance of students' social media accounts. State legislators have taken notice of the incident in light of increasing media coverage.

In response to the growing controversy, the state legislature's oversight committee has decided to investigate the situation and hold hearings. Stay tuned for further coverage as the committee members work together to determine the big questions in play, organize effective hearings, and report the facts.