CASE STUDY 7.1

David Burton

David Burton, a computer teacher at Cromwell Junior High in Newtown, carefully hung up the phone and pondered the call he had just received from Walt Jordan, his counterpart at Blair Junior High School. The computer crash that occurred three days ago, causing serious problems for the three junior high schools that were linked into a central mainframe located at Blair, had been traced to Cromwell. A technician at Blair was able to pinpoint the exact time and place of the crash: the computer room at Cromwell during David’s lunch hour. “Damn it,” muttered David. He was not looking forward to trying to find out who, among all the students at Cromwell, was responsible. But he had to do it. The crash had caused too much trouble. It was just the kind of event that would encourage school administrators to limit access to the computer system for all students.

David Burton had been a computer teacher at Cromwell for ten years, and he was also the site manager of the computer room at the school. He got along well with his colleagues and the students at Cromwell, and he described his situation as “the best job in the best location.” He had taught at the other two junior high schools in Newtown before coming to Cromwell, but Cromwell was where he had made a home for himself.

Cromwell Junior High School, located on a well-maintained campus, served 800 students in grades 7 to 9. Of the three junior high schools in Newtown, Cromwell was the most progressive in using computers across the curriculum. Unlike the situation at the other two schools, where only math teachers saw a use for computers in their classrooms, there were teachers in each of the disciplines at Cromwell who were excited about computer applications in their classes. David attributed this interest, at least in part, to the population of students at Cromwell. The school drew the majority of its students from the wealthier sections of Newtown. Most of these students came to school eager to learn and presented few behavior problems. In addition, many of them had access to computers at home and were avid computer students.

Because of the interest of the faculty and the students, David was able to introduce several new computer courses into the junior high school curriculum at Cromwell. Among his accomplishments was an increased student enrollment in the computer courses. Moreover, students were demonstrating interest in the use of computers in general. Students could be found in the computer lab at any time. Even when a computer class was not scheduled, the lab was filled with students; when a class was going on, it was not unusual to see one or two students looking for an empty terminal to complete a
school or personal project. David was proud of the interest the students showed in computers and always encouraged students to use the equipment as much as possible, feeling that the only way they could really learn was by experimenting on their own. But he allowed access only when he was in the room to supervise. When he was not there, students could use the room only with his written permission.

David thought back to the day of the crash. He had taken a rather long lunch with Sue Hanson, the new librarian, who was interested in computerizing the library holdings. No one had asked permission to use the room. He decided to consult Fred Collins, who taught a course at that time in another classroom that was separated by a glass partition from the computer classroom.

David caught up with Fred Collins as he was on his way out of school that afternoon and explained the situation to him. “Now that you mention it, I did see Paul Arnold and Mike Miller in there that day,” Fred said. “But I never thought anything about it. They’re always in there at lunchtime.”

“Thanks,” said David. “Paul and Mike,” he thought to himself. “That makes sense; they could have easily gotten the password while they were watching me log on.”

Paul Arnold and Mike Miller, ninth-graders, were close friends, though from very different backgrounds. Paul, an honor student and a computer whiz, came from a wealthy home. His father was a local businessman who was well known in the community, and his parents often came to school functions. Paul had a computer at home and ran a computer bulletin board from there. Mike, on the other hand, came from a more modest background. His family’s income was not exceptional, and his parents rarely took an interest in school matters. Mike was an average student whose skills with computers did not match Paul’s. However, he seemed very interested in computers and was doing well in David’s course this semester.

David reasoned that Paul might well have considered breaking into the computer system a challenge to his rapidly developing skills. He doubted that either of the boys wanted to crash the system and guessed that the crash was an accident. Clearly, he needed to confront them with what he knew and what he guessed and find out from them what really happened. A full confession and an apology would be enough for David, who would then mete out a minimal punishment for the two boys.

David found Paul and Mike together the next day in the computer lab. He got right to the point, telling them what he had learned the previous day. “I can’t figure out why you would want to do it, but I know that you were responsible for breaking into the mainframe system and crashing it. Want to tell me what possessed you guys to do that?”

Mike stirred in his seat, but Paul responded before Mike had a chance to say anything. “What are you talking about? What crash?”
“Come on, Paul. Mr. Collins saw you here, in the computer room, at the exact time of the crash. I know that you were working on the computer then, and I know that you’re one of the few kids in the school who could have figured out how to get access to the system. What I don’t understand is why you would want to.”

“Mr. Burton, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Mike and I always ask you before we come into the computer room. Isn’t that right, Mike?”

Mike nodded, but he didn’t say a word. It was clear to David that Paul was going to handle this by trying to bluff his way out of it, if he could. David felt himself get angry. “Don’t play dumb, Paul. Mr. Collins saw you here, in this room.”

Paul looked directly at David. “I can’t believe that, Mr. Burton. How could he have seen us if we weren’t here? Mike and I always ask you before we use the lab. If you didn’t give us permission to be in here that day, we weren’t here.”

David sighed and told them to get out of the computer room. There was no question in his mind that the boys were guilty. However, if he couldn’t get them to tell him the truth, he had no choice but to bring the matter to the attention of John Carter, principal of Cromwell. That was a task he did not relish. Carter had been principal for four years, and Cromwell was his first principalship. A former English teacher, Carter spent most of the school day in his office. Always pleasant to the faculty, he had made it clear early in his tenure that he preferred not to be presented with problems and not to have his authority challenged. Since principals in the Newtown school district were very powerful—they could transfer teachers, change assignments, and modify individual teaching schedules—most teachers tried to please him.

“Carter’s going to love this,” thought David. “But best to get unpleasant tasks over with. They can only get worse.” David smiled ruefully to himself as he remembered his mother saying this to him more than once.

Later that day, Carter listened patiently to David’s story. He agreed that he and the assistant principal would question the boys. Two days later, he called David to report that the boys had stuck to their story and insisted that they had not been in the computer room at the time of the crash. Carter was convinced that they were lying.

“What do you suggest for punishment?” Carter asked.

“Well, I would have been inclined to be lenient if they had admitted they were responsible,” said David, “but now I think we’ve got to be pretty tough.”

“I agree,” answered Carter. “Jim Morris over at Blair is really fuming. He claims he lost all the payroll records for the last month. What about barring them from using the computer room for the rest of the school year?”

“Yes, I guess so. But they’re both in my computer course. Since they can’t use the computer room, they’ve got to be dropped and failed. That seems appropriate.”
“OK, if you say so.” Carter sounded less than enthusiastic. “Boy, Ken Arnold is not going to like this. He’s already got MIT in mind for his son. But justice is justice. Draft letters for the parents, will you, Burton? Try to have them for me before you go home today.”

A week later, Paul Arnold walked into David’s office. “Hi. I came to talk to you about my independent study assignment.”

“What independent study assignment?” snapped David. He still had not forgiven Paul.

“Didn’t Carter tell you? My dad went to see him when he got the letter in the mail. My dad was really mad about the punishment you handed out—failing the computer course. He threatened to sue the school district. Carter agreed to let me complete the course at home as an independent study project, since he was sure you would never let me in the computer room.”

David wanted to say, “Why wasn’t I informed about all this?” but thought better of it. Paul, after all, bore no responsibility for Carter’s behavior or for his father’s. After a moment David said quietly, “OK, if that’s how Mr. Carter wants it. Go see if you can find Mike while I work out an assignment. I don’t want to go over it twice.”

Paul shifted his feet. “Uh, Mike isn’t completing the course.”

“What do you mean? Why not?”

“Well, Carter didn’t say anything about him. He made the arrangement for me.”

“Didn’t you tell Mike?”

“Yeah, we talked. But he knows his mom or dad wouldn’t come in to see Carter, and he’s afraid to talk to him.”

“How do you feel about that?”

Paul shrugged and looked uncomfortable. “I don’t know. I really don’t. The whole thing is weird. Can’t we just get this over with?”

David pushed deeper into his chair. “Yeah, let’s get this over with. Come back tomorrow at this time, and I’ll have some assignments for you.” As he watched Paul walk out of his office, he was really angry. He felt like calling Carter and giving him an earful. “But,” reasoned David, “if I let him know how angry I am, he’ll probably transfer me to the custodial staff tomorrow.”