

Boy suffocated during school punishment Coroner's Report

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Gilles Poirier and Isabelle Lepine, parents of Gabriel Poirier, below, are overcome by emotion at a press conference at the office of their lawyer yesterday in Montreal.

MONTRÉAL

- After nine-year-old Gabriel Poirier was discovered lifeless in his classroom last April 17, his parents were



Photos By John Kenney, Canwest News Service

Gilles Poirier and Isabelle Lepine, parents of Gabriel Poirier.

told their autistic son had stopped breathing after hiding under a heavy therapeutic blanket.

Now a coroner has revealed that Gabriel's teachers had tightly wrapped him in the buckwheat-stuffed blanket, leaving only the tips of his ears sticking out, as punishment when he became disruptive. They left him unsupervised in a corner for 20 minutes, returning when a timer sounded.

Gabriel was unconscious and blue in the face. He was rushed to hospital, where he died the following night surrounded by his family.

In a report published yesterday, Coroner Catherine Rudel-Tessier concluded the child suffocated. She said the teachers at the special-needs school in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Que., failed to follow guidelines for the blankets, which are used commonly to calm autistic children.

"He was only 53 pounds, he was so small," Gilles Poirier, the boy's father said at a news conference yesterday. "How can they wrap him up like that in a 40-pound blanket? How can this treatment be tolerated?"

Ms. Rudel-Tessier said proper use of the blanket called for a child to be rolled at most once and for his head to be left uncovered. The blanket was to be used as a relaxation therapy, not as a punishment, and teachers were supposed to keep an eye on children using the blankets.

"A child rolled 'at least four times' in such a heavy blanket is under restraint," the coroner wrote.

Jean-Pierre Menard, a lawyer representing Gabriel's parents, is calling for changes to legislation to control the use of restraints in schools. The parents are also planning to sue the Hautes-Rivieres school board.

The coroner said use of the blankets should be ceased until clear guidelines are established. Basic rules would include ensuring the blanket is not too heavy for the child, never covering the child's head, ensuring that vital signs can always be observed, never rolling the child in the blanket and ensuring the child can get out if he wants to.

Kathleen Provost, executive director of the Autism Society of Canada, said weighted blankets can be calming for autistic children when used under the guidance of an occupational therapist. "They have a therapeutic use and can be relaxing," she said.

Mr. Menard said the parents were surprised to learn Gabriel had been

placed in the blanket as a punishment. The school board had initially said it was a natural death and that Gabriel had gone under the blanket on his own.

"The principal said they found Gabriel under the blanket and he wasn't breathing. The parents thought that something had happened while he was sleeping and that was how he died," Mr. Menard said. He said the school board later told the media that Gabriel had hidden under the blanket.

Mr. Poirier said he cannot understand why his child was placed in a restraint. "He was a very gentle boy," he said. "Sometimes he was loud, but he was never aggressive or violent. I just don't understand how this happened," he said, tears streaming down his face.

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