



After the Fire: The Teachable Moment A Teacher's Story

Dale Spafford admits when he first got *After the Fire: The Teachable Moment* from Prevention 1st Foundation, the packet sat on the corner of his desk at Clara Barton School in the city of Rochester, New York. He knew the fire safety information in it was important, but wondered when he could possibly fit it in, especially during the busy beginning of the school year.

Then the day after Columbus Day, he walked into school and his principal told him a student in his sixth-grade class had a fire at home on the holiday.

"I *ran* to that packet," he says now.

Dale gave the boy, who had to move in with his grandmother after the fire, a ride to school. When they arrived, the boy was asked a million questions by his peers, who of course had already heard about the fire. The dialogue had begun, ready or not. Fortunately, Dale was ready, with *After the Fire*.

"I threw out the planned curriculum for the week, because this was too fresh, and too scary," he remembers. "We had to deal with it."

Having checked first with both the boy and his father, Dale asked the boy to describe his experience to his classmates. As they listened to his story, their anxiety showed on their faces. But guided by Dale, they moved on to strategizing what to do if they ever had a fire in their own home—get out when the alarm goes off, check the door, stay low, don't go back inside for anything.

By the end, the boy felt better after talking about the incident, and having the empathy of his classmates. All of the students had dealt with the anxiety the incident created, and started to think about positive steps they could take to prevent a tragedy in their own homes.

Over the next three days, Dale took his class through each of the three modules provided in *After the Fire*: Processing the Event, Fire Survival, and Fire Prevention. Each module includes a short list of suggested classroom activities for different age groups, recommended books and take-home activities for families, and additional resources.

"It helped me as a teacher," Dale says of *After the Fire*. "It gave me the structure for *how* to teach this, instead of me just trying to use what I know."

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He read to his class *A Chair for My Mother*, a book recommended in the Processing module and available in the school library, which describes a family coping with the aftermath of a fire. In the school's computer lab they went to www.homefiredrill.org and used the resources there to learn how to plan and practice a home fire drill, and make sure their home had a working smoke alarm.

These lessons had an immediate effect: kids volunteered the fact that they had gone home and checked their smoke alarms. Several reported having found a lighter and either taken it to a grown-up or, in the case of a lighter found on the street, thrown it in the garbage "so a *little* kid wouldn't find it."

Dale intends to revisit and reinforce these lessons throughout the school year, and his typical curriculum offers opportunities to do so. For example, a book he regularly teaches was written by an African-American poet who became a foster child because he lost his parents in a fire. When he teaches this book of poetry, it will be another opportunity to go over the life-saving lessons from *After the Fire*.

"Thank God I had this program to guide me in talking about a fire, and how to prevent further incidents," he says. "It helped me immensely to deal with something I hadn't had to deal with before in my career. It helped the kids process the event, and they also really internalized the lessons learned. The kids need it. We need it."

He adds: "If I hadn't had the fire, I don't know if I'd feel the same way. But now I want to keep this in my repertoire forever."

Teachers interested in "After the Fire" materials should call Prevention1st Foundation at (585) 383-6505.