

Massachusetts 14-year-old to be tried as adult in slaying of teacher

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Massachusetts authorities announced Wednesday that 14-year-old Philip Chism, a student at Danvers High School north of Boston, would stand trial as an adult for the killing Tuesday of his teacher, 24-year-old Colleen Ritzer. The youth is being held without bail after pleading not guilty to a single count of first-degree murder in Salem District Court.

According to reports, Chism had been asked by Ritzer to stay after class Tuesday for help on an upcoming math exam. District attorneys for Essex County say that at around 3:30 p.m. the teen followed Ritzer into a school restroom, where he “assaulted and subsequently murdered” her before “[disposing] of her body near the high school grounds.” Police found her body early Wednesday after a missing persons report was filed when she failed to return home after work.

Chism, having been reported as a missing child, was later detained in a nearby town while walking along the highway at about 12:30 a.m. After an interview with the suspect and a review of “corroborating evidence” obtained from the crime scene, police placed Chism under arrest. No motive has been determined in the killing.

Many at the school have expressed feelings of shock and bewilderment at the crime allegedly committed by Philip Chism. “He wasn’t violent at all. He was really the opposite of aggressive,” stated Kyle Cahill, a classmate who played on the school soccer team with the accused youth. “From what I know about him and seeing him every day, it just doesn’t add up that he would do such a thing, unless this was all an act to fool somebody,” said Ryan Kelleher, another teammate.

Students organized a memorial Wednesday for the slain teacher, offering wreaths and other items in her remembrance. “She was just filled with joy,” Charlotte Dzerkacz, a middle school Spanish teacher close to the

victim, told the *New York Daily News*. “It still doesn’t feel real ... It feels like she’s still going to be there when we get back,” said Marisa Belthoff, one of Ritzer’s students.

Despite laws protecting juvenile offenders’ names and records from becoming public, Chism’s name was released to the press and his image in court widely broadcast on television. Within hours of his apprehension, it was announced that Chism would be tried as an adult in Massachusetts court. At his arraignment on Wednesday, defense attorney Denise Regan pleaded that her client was “only 14,” but was told by the judge that the trial would be in “adult court and [also be] an adult proceeding.” Likewise, the attorney’s efforts to have the proceedings hidden from the public to protect her client’s identity were rebuffed.

The proposal to try the defendant as an adult has disturbing implications. The US juvenile justice system was a product of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during what has come to be known as the Progressive Era. Differentiating minors from adults in criminal matters was based on the idea that a youth, not yet fully developed socially and psychologically, could more easily be rehabilitated than a hardened criminal. In contrast, in recent decades law and order ideology and rhetoric have been used to eliminate the distinction between minors and adults.

Under these circumstances it is significant that the court system of Massachusetts, a state long associated with more liberal political traditions, is trying the 14-year-old Chism in an adult court of law.

Tuesday’s events mark the second time within a single week that murderous violence has erupted inside United States public schools. On Monday, a 12-year-old in Sparks, Nevada opened fire on his classmates, killing a teacher and wounding several students before

taking his own life.

The killing also comes nearly a year after the mass shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut that led to the deaths of 27 people, including 20 children.



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