

## Do You Lose When You Choose?

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### ***Monday, January 12, 7:30 a.m.***

The newspaper slammed down on the round table with a thud. Lori looked up from the chart she was preparing for her first period class, slightly annoyed by the interruption.

“Hi Mr. Cortez,” she said with all the politeness she could manage on a Monday morning.

Mr. Cortez had been at Lori’s school for ages, it seemed. His face showed the wear and tear of years in the classroom, and the constant mumbling under his breath at every staff meeting portrayed his frustration with the system. Not officially the union representative of the school, he was still always the man to go to with any questions regarding teachers’ union rights.

“Have you seen the *Post* this morning,” he bellowed with more volume than could have been meant for just Lori’s ears.

Lori shook her head slowly from side to side, hesitant to speak at all based on the fiery look in his eyes.

“The so-called chancellor of schools is trying to pull the union out from under us. She’s trying to strip teachers of tenure so she can fire us all!” he said.

Lori really had no clue what he was talking about, but it didn’t sound very good. What Lori did know was that ever since the new chancellor was appointed, her radical ways were more than upsetting the balance of the once-harmonious teachers union. Teachers were always buzzing about how things were starting to change and they were uncertain about the future of their profession under the chancellor’s leadership.

### ***9:05 a.m., Room 221***

As Lori called attendance in her first-period Honor’s English class, she found her mind drifting to what Mr. Cortez was complaining about earlier. What would it be like to work without the protection of tenure? Of course, she only had to work three years to obtain it—that didn’t seem like that long—but what would be the tradeoff for giving up the peace of mind from knowing that your job was secure?

Lori shook all of these distracting thoughts out of her head, but promised herself that she would seek out clarification when she had time. But for now she had to focus on her lesson.

"Okay class, we only have twelve more days until the state ELA test, and as eighth graders, this test could really set the tone for your high school years."

"Please Miss, can't we do something else besides test prep? I just can't take it anymore!" Jairon pleaded as other students chimed in with the same sentiments. "Don't worry Miss. We got this."

Lori knew that her students were prepared. She had been working hard all year to take a more organic approach to getting her students ready. Instead of teaching to the test, Lori made it a point to boost the students' critical thinking skills through the study of literature instead of multiple-choice questions. This mandated month of straight test prep didn't seem natural to her, but she had already had her share of disagreements with administration about her pedagogy, even though Lori would argue that they had absolutely no clue as to what it meant to be a good teacher. Regardless of her own victories with her students, the lack of leadership in her building was putting the school in danger of closing.

"I'm sorry guys, but please try to bear with me a little longer. This is necessary," Lori said to her class although deep down, she really didn't believe it.

### ***3:10 Dismissal Time***

"Rob, wait, I'll take the train with you," Lori said as she moved her timecard in the main office. As they walked out of the front doors, Lori finally felt safe to speak her mind with a coworker she trusted. "Did you hear Mr. Cortez go off today about the whole tenure debate? He said the chancellor of schools is offering us upwards of \$40,000 on top of our salary if we'd be willing to give up tenure. That's crazy, right? I mean, who couldn't use that kind of cash?"

Even after enduring a rough week at school, Rob looked as if his curiosity had just been aroused. "Seriously? Well that sounds competitive. That's exactly what we need around here. We're busting our butts every day and some teachers just sit at their desk doing the crossword puzzle. Do you know I walked into coverage today and the students were playing baseball with rolled up newspapers and a giant paper ball? For a second I thought they were unsupervised but then I saw Mr. Luis sitting in the corner. Unreal! It would be nice if the criteria for keeping your job around here was more than just having a pulse."

"So are you going to do it? Lori asked.

If Rob asked her the same question, Lori really didn't know how she would answer—but she knew she wanted to find out more about the process. She could definitely picture toasting a glass of wine with all her corporate friends celebrating the big bonus at the end of a hard year of teaching. Maybe then they wouldn't tilt their head to the side and say things like, "I'd love to be a teacher if I could live on such a small paycheck. But, really, what you do for a living is so nice."

Rob looked just as uncertain about the decision as Lori knew she was, but still, there was a certain spark in his eyes as they spoke.

"I'm really thinking about going for it," Rob said. "This might just be what we need to bring some legitimacy back to our profession. Besides, we have nothing to worry about. We're good teachers. We're not going anywhere—tenure or not."

***Sunday, 8 p.m.***

Rob tried not to think about the tenure issue all weekend, but it kept creeping into his mind. He too was feeling a lot of social pressure from his friends and family about the size of his paycheck. His own father, the corporate lawyer, nagged Rob all the time, saying "How do you expect to raise a family on that kind of money?" His father once even went so far as to say that he didn't pay for four years of college for Rob to do the work of a babysitter. Every time Rob thought about it he became incensed. He was so passionate about having the opportunity to positively shape the lives of his students. If his father only knew how long he stayed up at night drafting lesson plans and figuring out new ways to inspire his students. Rob was tired of the lack of respect teachers had in most people's eyes. Maybe if he took this deal his father would finally get off his back. Rob decided that he would seek out Mr. Cortez for more answers. Although he could already imagine that Mr. Cortez would be against any agreement that might pull power away from the union, he still trusted his word and knew he would be more knowledgeable about it than anyone else.

***Monday, January 19, 9:05 a.m., Room 221***

"Let me guess Miss, more test prep," Jarion said as he faked a gagging sound in the back of his throat. "I've been looking forward to it ALL weekend."

"Funny, Jarion," Lori said. "But I'm sorry to disappoint. Today we are jumping ahead to start our poetry unit."

The students—being naturally good at overhearing any conversation that doesn't involve them, even if during class they couldn't recall the question you just asked—started roaring with applause.

"Thank you Miss, finally," Jarion verbalized the sentiments of the rest of the class. "I told you we got this test stuff."

Just as the students started taking notes on how to analyze poetry, Principal Hammond walked in with clipboard in hand. Several students slyly rolled their eyes but were careful not to be caught doing it. However, some students offered Mr. Hammond a smile—he had on more than one occasion proven that he really does care about the students. Lori felt her stomach muscles tighten into a cramp—she was always uneasy around Mr. Hammond. Although she delivered high scores year after year, she felt like she was constantly being scrutinized.

After about fifteen minutes of intense observation, he finally left. The tension began to release from Lori's body. While the students were engaged in independent practice, Lori looked at Mr. Hammond's comments in her professional development log. As expected, he ripped into her for not continuing with the test prep curriculum saying, "Straying from the prescribed curriculum is borderline insubordination and could result in a letter to file" and "Please see me so we can better help you understand how to navigate the state standards to which we are all professionally bound."

Lori felt a rage boiling inside of her. Why must this man know so little about teaching that he hides behind buzzwords and protocol? Can't he see that the students are learning and are ready for this test? Doesn't he remember being a teacher at all?

### ***Wednesday, January 21, After-School Staff Meeting***

"So what does this all mean?" asked Mrs. Elliot. "Everyone decides to give up their tenure separately, or we have to decide as a school? And what really happens once we make our choice?"

"Okay," Ms. Garcia, M.S. 301's union representative began to explain. "Here's how it works in a nutshell. The school will receive funding to establish two pay tiers, red and blue. The teachers in the red tier continue to receive the traditional annual raise based on the salary step and retain tenure if they already have it. Those who volunteer to go into the blue tier will receive thousands of dollars in bonuses and raises for giving up their tenure and agreeing to annual reviews that evaluate student gains and test scores."

There was a rumble of voices in the group of teachers as they discussed with each other the possibilities that were before them. Lori, who was sitting next to Rob in the conference room, elbowed him discreetly.

"Hey," she said as she raised her eyebrows at Rob. "Hear that? Thousands of dollars! That's exactly what we've been talking about it."

“Yeah,” Rob said. “Sounds great. We’ve got nothing to worry about. We don’t need tenure to keep our jobs. We work hard enough to get the results we need to prove our worth around here.”

“That’s exactly right. Even if the administration doesn’t always agree with our practices, they can’t deny our results,” Lori confirmed out loud but in the back of her mind she was thinking about her run-in with Mr. Hammond earlier. “Anyway, who even cares what they think. We’re strong enough to stand on our own.”

The noise in the crowd was suddenly cut by a booming voice. “Wait a minute people. Let’s not be fooled into thinking this is a cut-and-dried decision. There are some things you really need to think about.”

Lori rolled her eyes at Rob. “Ugh, Mr. Cortez just won’t stop! He’s on his soapbox again.”

“Yeah, I was going to try to talk to him today to see how he feels about all this, but I guess this makes it pretty clear,” Rob said.

“Don’t talk to him about it,” Lori joked. “He’ll trap you for hours going on and on about union pride. He’d never take this option, and he’d just try to talk you out of it.”

“Think about it,” Mr. Cortez continued, “this system is based on measuring your effectiveness, but what does that even mean? Who will you trust to evaluate your teaching? And by what measure? If you somehow don’t make the cut, who do you think will replace you? A new teacher who knows even less than you? And is money really what it takes to buy you out? Why aren’t we fighting more important battles like smaller class sizes and better working environments? You’re all delusional if you think that making this decision won’t make you vulnerable to losing everything. The union is here to protect you and through them we can get the things that we want—the things that we deserve. Let’s work with them, not against them.”

The meeting broke up shortly after. Some stayed around to ask some follow-up questions or talk it over in their small groups. Lori and Rob chatted as they walked out of the conference room.

“So I know I asked you a few days ago, but what do you think now? Do you think you’ll go for it?” Lori asked.

“I think so,” Rob answered. “You?”

“I’m going to do it,” Lori said. “This seems like a good opportunity and I don’t want to miss out on it. The competition will be good for the profession and we’ll finally be getting the compensation we deserve.”

Lori planned on celebrating with her friends that weekend. She had a lot to look forward to—a bigger paycheck, respect from her peers, and bringing new meaning to the word "teaching."

### ***Friday, Outside of Room 208***

With a few days to think it over, Rob approached Mr. Cortez's classroom with his decision finalized—he was ready to show his father and the rest of the world exactly what kind of professional he really was. He was going to take the deal and rest solely of the knowledge that he was a hard worker who would prove that he was able to compete for his paycheck. He wanted to tell Mr. Cortez that he wasn't afraid to disagree with the union on this issue.

The door to room 208 was open and Rob assumed that Mr. Cortez was on a prep because there was absolute silence. After peeking in he realized that the room was full of students staring at Mr. Cortez. After a few moments of silence, Mr. Cortez said, "Think before you answer. Did Malcolm X's childhood experiences help or hinder him from becoming a powerful civil rights leader?" The students stared and Rob chuckled to himself. He was very familiar with the "blank stare syndrome" that he got from most of his students on a daily basis. He felt for Mr. Cortez and wondered how many days he would spend re-teaching this objective until it finally clicked with the students. Rob backed away from the door, wanting to give his colleague some space in this moment. Suddenly, like a group of synchronized swimmers executing their winning move, every student's hand in room 208 shot up and waved around.

Mr. Cortez smiled confidently as he began calling on students to validate their thoughts on the topic and challenge them to offer evidence from the text. As the bell rang, students scrambled to write down the nightly homework assignment and clean up the room. Rob was shocked. This was the teacher who was always hiding behind the union? But for what? This was the best snapshot of exemplary teaching that Rob had ever seen within the walls of this crumbling school building.

As the students shuffled out at the sound of the bell, Mr. Cortez approached Rob.

"Hey Rob, how's it going? You need something?" he asked.

"I just wanted to say that after watching the last few minutes of that class, I'm convinced that if anyone should give up tenure and take the extra money, it should be you."

Rob expected Mr. Cortez to start ranting about the strength of the union and the teachers' obligation to support the institution that works so hard to protect them. To his surprise, Mr. Cortez smiled.

"No one could ever care about the work that I do in this room more than I do, and I don't need a boost in pay to motivate me. What I do need is to protect my right to do what I

love the most for the rest of my career—and what I love the most is coming here every day and teaching.”

Rob only shook his head back and forth because all that he really wanted to say was stuck in his throat. He wanted to say that he truly understood what Mr. Cortez was trying to say and that he felt that same way. He knew deep down all that really mattered to him was doing what he loved, which was teaching kids everyday.

“So Rob,” Mr. Cortez said. “Are you going to do it? Are you going to give it all up for your big chance at who knows what?”

Rob didn’t stop shaking his head. “No,” he said. “No. I have everything I need right here.”

“Good,” Mr. Cortez said with a smile. “That makes two of us.”

### ***May 17, Principal’s Office***

“Listen Bob, you have to really consider the fact that with the proposed budget cuts coming down the line, next year’s organizational sheet may look a lot different than you anticipated. You have to prepare yourself and your team for that possibility.”

Naomi Garcia was Mr. Hammond’s closest confidant at MS 301 along with being the school’s union representative. She was the only person in the building who addressed him by his first name.

“But what are my options here? If I do have to make cuts, where will I start? I already have my team in mind for next year. I don’t want to upset that balance,” Mr. Hammond replied, hesitant to hear what was coming next.

“You can spend a lot of time and effort trying to excess any of the tenured teachers that you don’t think are living up to the expectations of the school community—and trust me, you can expect to deal with many grievances if you go that route—or you can take the easy way out. Just give an unsatisfactory rating to a teacher in the blue tier and be done with it. That’s the choice they made. They’ve been reaping the benefits of high prestige and higher salaries all year long. They’ll be fine. You have to think about what’s really worth your time and effort as you try to move this school forward.”

Mr. Hammond’s face drew longer as Naomi continued.

“Surely there must be someone from the blue tier that you’ve been questioning their fit here at 301. Go with your gut. This is your school and your choice. Make a decision,” Naomi concluded and excused herself from the room. After knowing the principal for all these years, she knew what he needed most was time alone to think it through.

Mr. Hammond sat at his conference-style table all alone and spun the Mont Blanc pen his wife gave him around the glossy mahogany surface. Even though Naomi made it sound so simple, he knew no decision he could make here would be easy. He thought of his teachers, the school culture, and own future as a leader. He plucked the stark white organizational list from the table, ripped it into shreds, and tossed them on the floor. He pulled a blank paper from the printer—he always preferred pen and paper to working on the computer. He started from the beginning as he always did—sketching floor plans, placing teachers around like chess pieces in the boxes, changing lives forever.

### Discussion Questions

- 1) How might having teachers within the same school with different rights/benefits affect the culture of the school and the work environment?
- 2) What might school systems lose/gain by altering the current teacher-pay system?
- 3) How does giving up tenure make teachers vulnerable? In what ways do teachers miss out if they don't give up tenure?