

In the Wake of “No Child Left Behind”

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Bennett Elementary is situated in a low-income Latino neighborhood. While there is a strong parent outreach program that encourages, educates, and supports parent participation, parent participation is limited for a variety of reasons. There is a high mobility rate and a large English Language Learner (ELL) (75%) population. Bennett has been labeled a failing school, and is currently in “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Program Improvement. In contrast, Lincoln Elementary is situated in a middle to high middle class neighborhood. It has a small ELL population (7%), low mobility rate, and high parent involvement. They regularly meet their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goal. In both schools, the teachers are well qualified and dedicated.

Sue has been a 4th grade teacher at Bennett for five years. Although her teaching position is a challenging one, she very much enjoys her job. The day had started out well. Students had worked hard until getting dismissed, after which, parent-teacher conferences commenced. Because Sue has a great working relationship with her students’ parents, she was excited about sharing all her students’ successes during this past grading period. However, this excitement rapidly turned into great disappointment when at one particular parent-teacher conference she discovered that one of her students, Danny, a true academic success story, was leaving. He was leaving to go to Lincoln Elementary, a school not currently in NCLB Program Improvement.

As subsequent conferences ensued, Sue became increasingly distracted. Slowly succumbing to the intense emotions she was feeling as a result of Danny’s conference, she slogged through the remaining conferences. Afterwards, she began to get ready for the next day of school.

Bearing a glazed expression, Sue trudged into the workroom and began sliding papers into the printer. While Sue looked blankly out the window at the distant mountains, her co-worker Michelle watched her blindly enter the requirements for

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copies and press start. As the printer began to spit out page after page of the worksheet, Michelle’s voice emerged amid the abrasive machinations of the printer, “Sue, how many copies do you need?”

Sue looked down at the mountain of copies that had spilled onto the floor, a mere eighty copies too many, and muttered to herself under her breath as she angrily mashed the stop button on the printer. Michelle saw the unmistakable melancholy in her friend’s manner and said, “Don’t tell me. I know what you’re thinking, you should have married that rich guy, Byron, you met before you met your husband...that way you could be at home with your children living a life of leisure instead of being here holding conferences.

“How did you guess? My mom always said that I should have married that Byron and learned to love him later.”

“Seriously, Sue what’s up? Is something bothering you?”

“I can’t believe it. At Danny’s conference his mother told me that she is moving her children to Lincoln Elementary because our school’s AYP scores have put us in Program Improvement. She’s worried and wants to put him in a “high achieving” school.

“Gosh Sue, that’s too bad. I know how hard you have worked with Danny this year.”

Sue moved closer to Michelle and uttered cautiously: “It is so frustrating, Michelle. I feel like giving up. I showed Danny’s mother all the work samples, and classroom assessments I have that show how much progress he has made since the beginning of the year, but that wasn’t enough. She couldn’t get past the fact that we are going into Program Improvement. She is like a lot of our parents. They really don’t understand the significant drawbacks of the NCLB assessment process.”

“That’s for sure Sue. Parents don’t realize that because we have so many ELL students who are new to the U.S. and don’t know English, our school has trouble

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showing progress on the NCLB high stakes exam even though we have our school wide assessments to prove our students are making good progress. Our students are still learning English. How can they do well on that test?”

Michelle looked around to see who was listening and in a near whisper began,

“I understand why parents are scared. But little do they know, that Lincoln School, the supposedly ‘superior’ school, ... you know, the one with a high AYP scores, has a very minimal ELL program and doesn’t have half the support for ELL students that our school offers. Their school is only 7% ELL students. That is part of the reason their scores are higher. Here at Bennett we have so many grants, programs, and community partners who have helped us set up a great support system for our students. Lincoln Elementary doesn’t have the before- and after-school tutoring, parent education program, and daycare that we have. I have taught here for the last three years and I have learned a lot from you and the other teachers about how to help ELL students. We have a great staff. Our teachers are very well trained and we put in lots of extra hours to help our students.”

Confident in the support she would receive from her friend, Sue began to share her most private thoughts: “Michelle, I feel exceedingly disappointed and a little incompetent. Sometimes I just want to move to another school, so I won’t have to feel the pressures that come from that “No Child Left Behind” debacle and being at an “underachieving school”. In my heart I feel like I’m doing a good job. Our principal seems to think so, too. At the same time, I am feeling like a failure.

Later that week after a district in-service at Lincoln School, Sue had a conversation with her friend, John, in the workroom. John is an ELL teacher who has worked at Lincoln School for the past 4 years. Prior to that, he worked at Bennett. John and Sue are both members of a national leadership organization and share an interest in educational policy making.

Interested in having some fun teasing his friend, John remarks: “Hey, Sue I hear you guys at Bennett are failures! What have you been doing over there, sitting in the

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lounge eating bonbons for the past year? Too bad you guys can't compete with our superior teachers here at Lincoln.” “You guys need to get your act together,” he laughed.

“All right John, don't get too proud of yourself. You know what they say: Pride cometh before the fall. Besides revenge is sweet,” Sue quipped.

“Seriously Sue, I really feel awful about what has happened. This all must be really frustrating for you. I know how hard you work and what a great teacher you are; it must make you feel wretched to have people thinking that your school is so inferior to ours. I hope you aren't taking this all personally. You know your students' progress has to do with more factors other than your teaching. That NCLB assessment policy is so counterproductive. You can't use one grade level standardized test to assess students. Students come to schools with varying amounts of preparedness. This policy seems to unfairly punish teachers and schools with certain kinds of populations. I wish policymakers would get sensible and use the growth model so you could show what good things you are doing with your students. By the way, is it true Sue that some of your teachers are leaving your school?”

“Yes, Mindy and Sam are leaving. They told me that they couldn't take the pressure and the feeling of being a failure anymore. It's such a shame because they are great teachers. Our students really need them. They are so dedicated to their students. I'm with you, I really think measuring the success of my teaching and the progress of my students using a single standardized test is very unfair. Everybody talks about the importance of teacher accountability and student achievement. I am all for teaching accountability and I am passionate about ensuring high student achievement, but I just want a fair and useful means for their assessment.”

Karen, a seasoned special education teacher, sauntered into the workroom and sat down at the table. Karen has taught a mild- to moderate-learning disabilities class for the past 15 years. Students really connect with her. She holds high expectations for her students and excels in helping students learn.

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After listening for a while she was eager to engage in this hot topic of conversation. Karen got comfortable and began, “I couldn’t help hearing part of your conversation. I’m with you. Testing for my students is so demoralizing for them. Can you believe it? They have to take a test on a reading level above the level they read on. How in the world can you expect them to do well under those circumstances? Not to mention, as it stands right now, the information we obtain from these tests is very broad in nature and not very useful to teachers. We can’t even compare the scores from one year to the next. I think we should use the growth model to measure student achievement. We could measure student progress at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year. Then compare the results, measuring student growth. We don’t need a standardized testing system that resembles a two-week hostile takeover of our school each year. I’ll bet at the local or state level we could come up with a criterion-referenced test based on the state-mandated academic standards. If we used it we could probably save tons of money and have much more information that would prove very useful to us. I don’t know about you, but I think that those testing companies control Congress. It’s all about money making.”

Feeling the stress incurred as a result of talking about this situation, John spied the big box of leftover doughnuts on the table and carefully pulled it open, choosing a custard-filled chocolate one. “That sounds too reasonable, Karen,” John joked. “I know we don’t have the problem of being in Program Improvement like Bennett School, but I worry about my ELL students. How can my ELL students be successful on a grade level test that includes language they can’t understand? They can’t even succeed on the math section because the test items are mainly language-based questions.”

“That reminds me, John,” Sue added, “I was reading about the growth model the other day. If a growth model is used, among other things, there will still be problems with the narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and reliance on a single type of assessment to show progress. If we adopted the growth model, I don’t see how you would determine who or what helped a student succeed and how effective a teacher is when there are some many factors involved in a child’s academic progress. Did the student get help from other teachers, parents, and/or the family? (Weiner, 2008) Did the

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student experience other changes that might have contributed to a student’s success? Did the present teacher make the difference in the student’s progress or was it last year’s teacher who laid the foundation for great success in the following year. Evaluating student progress and teacher effectiveness is complicated. I don’t know what the answer is, but I know one thing: teachers need to become a part of the policy-making process because as it stands now it is not fair to our students or to us. I think that we can provide valuable insight into how policy will play out in the schools. This could then be used to develop an assessment program that will actually support good teaching and student progress.”

Parents’ Discussion of Possible Transfer to Lincoln Elementary

Later that week after school, two Bennett Elementary parents wait outside the school office for their children to be let out of school. After exchanging greetings they begin comparing notes on how their parent conferences went: “My daughter, Stephanie, did very well this past grading period. Her teacher said she went up a grade level in reading and is beginning to blossom in math,” Maria bragged proudly.

“I am so happy for you and your daughter,” Lupe replied. “Luis did well, too.” After sharing the good news, their conversation turned to the recent big news on campus, Bennett was going into the second year of Program Improvement.

“Lupe, did you hear that our school is going to be in Program Improvement for another year? This year we will have the option of transferring our student to another school in the district.”

Just at that moment Stephanie ran up to her mom as said, “I don’t want to leave my school. All of my friends are here. I am not going to another school!”

Maria gave her daughter a hug, reassured her everything would be all right, and sent her to the playground to play with Luis. She wanted to continue this conversation.

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Lupe responded to Maria’s question. “Yes, I heard about it last week, and it made me wonder. Bennett is a good school, but maybe another school would be even better. What do you think, Maria?”

“You know Lupe, I know how hard our teachers work. I am here volunteering all the time. However, I need a way to make sure Stephanie is taught all that she needs to know so she can get into a good college. I’m not sure what makes a good teacher or how to measure their effectiveness, but I think that there needs to be a standardized procedure that ensures that their teaching is effective. The standardized test tells me how my child is doing on the state’s academic standards as compared with students across the nation. Those scores allow us as parents to have a way to evaluate the effectiveness of our school and teachers objectively. I am not sure I want to rely on a teacher’s opinion about the quality of teaching at our school. I’m thinking I will move Steph to a high-achieving school like Lincoln Elementary. Lupe, what do you think you are going to do?”

Looking a little embarrassed, Lupe reluctantly answers, “I’m not sure what to do. I have been asking all my friends if I should send my kids to another school next year. It is such a tough decision. My son, Luis, has really done well this year. His progress has been noticeable, but how do I know if he wouldn’t have done better at Lincoln School. The teachers I have asked at our school tell me not to worry about scores on the STAR (NCLB standardized testing), just look at how much progress Luis is making in class. I really love this school and the teachers, and so does Luis. I haven’t made up my mind yet whether to have my son go to Lincoln Elementary or not either. I think I will wait until the parent-teacher meeting next Tuesday night when the staff plans to give a presentation explaining what is happening.

Discussion Questions

- What are the good and bad points of making judgments about student progress and teacher effectiveness based on a standardized test score? Based on the growth model?

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- How can we improve the NCLB assessment policy to ensure effective and useful assessment of all students, including ELL and special education students?
- What kind of information should parents rely on when determining what school to attend?
- What kinds of things can help the teachers at Bennett stay motivated to remain teaching there?