

**All Students – One School<sup>1</sup>**  
By Cara Shuckett  
*TNLI MetLife Fellow, New York City, NY*  
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***A Planning Meeting – Thursday January 26<sup>th</sup> 8:30 am***

Charlotte Jameson hesitated and asked what Alexandra's final grade was.

Susan Greene took a deep breath and paused, "She has a 53%. It is not for lack of effort, but none of her work meets the standards. Even with all the modifications, she is still failing."

It was Thursday morning and report cards were due in a few days. Even when Charlotte had done all she could, she always felt a certain amount of guilt if students on her caseload failed. It was hard not to wonder if she could have been doing more for her students. What if she had spent more time with them after school or during lunch? What if she had reached out to parents more? What if she had done a better job differentiating the curriculum?

Charlotte became a special education teacher eight years ago in an inclusion setting because she believed that all students had the right to be a part of the general education classroom. She started working when she was fresh out of a master's program and was filled with strong ideals and enthusiasm. However, as the years went by, some of those same ideals were replaced with pessimism from the harsh realities on the ground. Things were not as simple as they once seemed.

Charlotte worked in Susan's English classroom several times a week in order to provide support for students with learning disabilities. She really valued her meeting time with Susan, because she felt as though there was true collaboration between them. It was such a pleasant change from some of the other high school teachers she had worked with over the past eight years.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspiration for this case was taken from *The Missing Links: What Students and Teachers Say about Inclusion and Achievement*, an action research study conducted by Sheldon Applewhite, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2002.

Charlotte sighed, “I don’t know what we should do. I don’t know how much more I can do to support her. Do you think if she repeats the grade things will change?”

Susan frowned, “I am not sure if repeating the grade will do anything, but morally I cannot give her a ninth grade English credit with the work that she has completed.”

Although Charlotte was strongly in favor of inclusion, she didn’t think that this was a good place for Alexandra. She needed so much more than what the school could give her in an inclusion class. She needed to be in a classroom with a special education teacher all the time. She was a hard working student, but the level of rigor in the school was too much for her.

Susan also believed in inclusion, but after ten years of teaching this year had been particularly difficult. In one class she had several students who were reading more than four grade levels behind as well as students who were capable of reading material at a college level. She struggled to challenge all the students at such different ability levels. As much as she was differentiating lessons and activities, it wasn’t enough for her students.

Susan continued, becoming more impassioned as she spoke, “I am so frustrated and feel so hopeless about my class; I have never felt so ineffective as a teacher. With Alexandra as well as a few others, I can’t ever seem to differentiate enough. How can I find articles about the downfall of the Roman Empire on a third grade reading level and still keep all the students engaged? You are not always in my classroom and I am often the only teacher in the room. Besides, if I present the material in four different ways and they still don’t get it, then isn’t it on them and not me? In many ways this class is making me feel like I am failing everyone—the lowest level kids and the highest level kids.”

Charlotte remembered what the special education teacher from middle school had told her about Alexandra. The middle school had placed her in an intervention class for reading and writing in addition to providing special education services. While most of the other kids in the program made significant gains in their reading scores and performance in classes, it didn’t seem to have any affect on Alexandra.

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders and nervously laughed, “I don’t know, I have been trying to find materials for the class but I can barely find anything that works. I have so many kids I am supposed to be working with. We have been doing a lot of leveled reading but it never seems to be enough.”

PS 692 was a public school in Brooklyn for students in grades six through twelve. The small school took pride in the diversity of students’ academic abilities. The teachers were expected to constantly differentiate lessons and assessments and there was a strong culture of collaboration among the staff. Nearly twenty percent of the student population received special education services. However, because it was a small school only one special education service model was provided. Special education students were fully integrated into general education classes and the special education teacher ‘pushed in’ to content classes for one period during the school day. There were no self-contained or collaborative team teaching classes.

Charlotte walked out of the meeting with Susan more torn than ever. Charlotte really didn’t know what the answer was. Does it make sense to pass Alexandra, even though she technically failed? Charlotte wondered how Alexandra was ever going to make it through high school. If she didn’t fail all of her classes she could end up going to summer school. However, most of the time students pass summer school simply by showing up every day. Summer school would not give her the additional support and learning that she desperately needed.

***The Principals Office- 4:30 pm***

Charlotte wanted to check in with her principal, Mark. When she got to his office, his door was open as usual.

Without any introduction she blurted out, “I just don’t know what to do about Alexandra.”

“Is she passing any of her classes?” Mark asked.

Charlotte replied, “She is failing English, history and math but may pass science. I don’t understand what I can do? You know Mark; this is not the right place for her. I could literally sit with Alexandra all day long and even then, I’m not sure if she would pass.”

Mark responded without hesitation, “You know I want you to spend your time and energy on students who are going to be successful. I need you to be working with the students who are going to grow academically at the school. You cannot be spending all your time working with Alexandra.”

As director of the high school, Mark felt that there were some students that didn’t belong in the high school. Alexandra was one of them. Although he pushed teachers to differentiate lessons and give students the required special education support, he believed that this was a rigorous college preparatory school. Since this was a small school there was not sufficient support or funding for students like Alexandra.

Mark continued, “Alexandra, even with the maximum level of support, is not going to be successful. Students who are not passing a class should fail. You are doing the best job that you can. If she wants to stay, then maybe we can give her an IEP diploma.”

Charlotte knew that an IEP diploma enabled a student to do very little. She thought there was a chance that Alexandra might possibly get a high school diploma if she had a lot of support and was in a self-contained classroom. Staying at the school would not meet her needs. Inclusion was supposed to open doors for students, not close them. However, it seemed that if Alexandra stayed in this school environment, she would end up with fewer options after high school.

“Have you been in touch with Alexandra’s parents?” Mark asked gently.

Charlotte responded with frustration, “The last time I spoke with the parents was a few months ago, but it felt like we were talking about two different children. Honestly I have avoided contacting them because I don’t know what to say. The only thing that Alexandra’s mom took from the last conversation was that Alexandra wasn’t trying hard.

But that was not what I was saying at all! I was quite honest, perhaps too blunt even. I straight out said that I wasn't sure Alexandra was going to be able to pass this year, let alone graduate high school."

Mark tried to be supportive, "As long as we have evidence that explains why she failed it's okay. Some students are just going to fail."

That seemed far too simplistic to Charlotte, "But how is that going to help her next year? Or the next? I honestly don't think that repeating ninth grade is going to change anything."

When Alexandra first came to the middle school her parents did not believe that she had a learning disability but eventually agreed to an evaluation. She was diagnosed with a learning disability and the parents were told that she needed a different setting. Yet, the parents refused. Alexandra struggled throughout sixth, seventh and eighth grade but passed, because the criteria for passing is different in middle school. When the director and teachers brought the parents in to discuss Alexandra's future in the high school they had differing opinions. The administration and staff believed Alexandra needed more support and special education services than the school could offer. They suggested other options but the parents disagreed and insisted Alexandra stay for high school.

Alexandra's parents felt that this high school was the right environment for her because she was happy in school for the first time. At other schools, Alexandra was teased because of her stutter, but no one made fun of her here. For the first time in years, Alexandra wanted to come to school everyday.

"I think the best thing to do is to wait until Alexandra gets her progress report and then we'll have another meeting with the parents. Alexandra is clearly not going to be able to get a regular diploma and we will explain that to her parents. I am happy to sit in on the meeting to help you. If they don't agree, then they can take her to a different school."

When Charlotte left Mark's office she knew she had her principal's support, but she didn't feel any better about the situation. She kept thinking about inclusion. When she was in graduate school, it seemed so much clearer.

***The Staff Room-Friday January 27<sup>th</sup> 4:00 pm***

The next afternoon, Charlotte saw Michelle in the staff room. Michelle was another high school special education teacher. Charlotte and Michelle often had conversations when they found a moment in the staff lounge, at the end of the day or during department meetings.

Charlotte was still troubled by the dilemma she was facing with Alexandra. "Michelle, do you ever wonder if the ideals you have about inclusion and the realities of teaching just don't mix?"

Michelle smiled, "I used to feel so sure about my education ideology until last year when I started working with juniors and seniors. Now, all my students are expected to get all their high school credits without any modifications on state tests or the curriculum. Some of them just can't do it. I can't figure out how it all fits."

Charlotte nodded in agreement, "Exactly. In theory, I support inclusion. That is exactly why I became a special education teacher in the first place. That is why I chose to work in a place that doesn't have a self-contained classroom, but its so much more complicated in practice."

Michelle and Charlotte continued to talk about the future of their students. Michelle admitted, "Not everyone is capable of college and I don't think that anything is wrong with that. But with the expectations of high schools and all the federal laws around testing, there is no wiggle room when we talk about high school diplomas."

"But if you don't get a regular high school diploma you might as well be a high school drop out," Charlotte responded frustrated, "I wish there was another option. Getting a special education diploma means nothing today!"

Charlotte nodded in agreement, "Yes, I wish there were other choices."

Michelle responded with strength, “But there aren’t. So we have to find a way. We are a public school and we need to find a way to support all of our students.”

Charlotte grabbed her stuff and headed home after a long week. She didn’t know what the answer was and she still wasn’t sure if it was worse if Alexandra passed or failed. What she did know was that Alexandra officially failed English, math and history. If she failed three or more classes next term she would automatically need to repeat the grade. If she failed fewer courses, there was a chance she could make up the credits in summer school. Charlotte also knew that soon she would be having a difficult conversation with Alexandra’s parents.

***The Office-February 4<sup>th</sup> 10:00 am***

Charlotte was downstairs making copies during her morning prep. When she walked into the office, the secretary asked her if she had a few minutes. Apparently Alexandra’s mom had shown up distraught over the progress report and Mark was out of the building. Charlotte agreed to meet with Alexandra’s mom alone.

Charlotte was nervous. She wasn’t sure what to tell her. How do you tell a parent that her child just can’t do the work? How do you tell her that even though Alexandra had been doing most of her homework, she was still failing?

The two of them sat in the conference room. Alexandra’s mom, Ms. Kendal, started by telling Charlotte how surprised she was that Alexandra failed every subject.

Charlotte responded firmly, “I called you in the fall to inform you that Alexandra was failing all her classes. Plus, we sent letters out in the mail last month informing families if a student was failing.”

Charlotte hesitated but continued, “Alexandra is a great kid and works pretty hard. But the work is too difficult for her. I don’t think that she is going to pass and she may need to repeat the year. “

Without flinching Ms. Kendal responded, “Fine.”

Somewhat surprised by Ms. Kendal's response, Charlotte continued with more confidence and momentum, "I know last year we discussed whether this was a good place for Alexandra and you really wanted her to stay for high school. However, Alexandra is reading at a third grade level and is not understanding the concepts taught in her classes. I don't think this is the right place for her; she needs more support than this school can give. If she continues here she may not be able to get a regular diploma."

Charlotte wanted Ms. Kendal to see that this was not the right place for Alexandra. Perhaps if Alexandra was at a different school, then she might be more successful.

Ms. Kendal responded without hesitation or emotion, "Alexandra is not working hard enough. She is not coming for extra help and is not asking questions if she doesn't understand. She has to work harder. If she fails and has to repeat the grade then she will. I do not want her at a different school. Alexandra was miserable in elementary school. She was teased every single day. She cried every morning because she didn't want to go to school. Here the students are kind and the staff is supportive. Alexandra has friends. I won't change that."

"But Ms. Kendal," Charlotte continued, "this is not the best place for Alexandra to learn. If she stays here she will continue to fail."

"Look Ms. Charlotte," Alexandra's mother said firmly as she stood up to leave, "Alexandra is my daughter and I know what is best for my child."

With that Ms. Kendal turned and walked out the door.

### **Discussion Questions**

- 1) What should Charlotte do regarding promoting Alexandra?
- 2) What is the school's responsibility to Alexandra?
- 3) What is the system's responsibility to Alexandra?