

When Did We Stop Calling Him Billy?

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“Good morning folks, it’s 6:15 in the morning on this glorious March day. The news is next on the Daily Report. This is WJBR FM.” Alice Scotten truly enjoyed listening to the morning show on this station each day, but today she was a bit preoccupied. As she slowly sipped her coffee, her mind trailed off to the day that was ahead of her. As a 15-year veteran teacher, she thought that she should be used to this time of year, when her students would take the state assessment. The time she spent working with her sixth and seventh grade students in preparing for this assessment, she hoped, would not be in vain. As a math teacher at Owens Middle School, she felt the pressures of the high-stakes test and saw what these pressures had done to her students and colleagues. “I wonder who it will be this year?” she asked herself as she thought of the absolute meltdown Billy had last year during the test. There always seemed to be several meltdowns by students each year, but last year was the first time she experienced one in her room. Gee, if this keeps up, maybe I’ll have the meltdown, she thought.

Owens Middle School (OMS)

Located in an historical town just outside of the largest city in the state, OMS was a school building that needed a makeover. The physical building itself was more than 50 years old, with major renovations almost 15 years old. The last improvements made to the building were air conditioning window units placed in each room of the three-story building. The building was dark, dreary, and the custodial staff had a difficult time maintaining it. The conditions did not create an environment that supported the learning of the 1,200 sixth and seventh grade students who attended the school. The district still bussed more than half of the OMS students from the inner-city to the school, which meant a majority of them spent two-and-a half hours on a school bus each day. The student body consisted of 38% Caucasian, 44% African-American, 16% Hispanic, and less than 1% Asian and American Indian. Over half of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Students placed in a regular education setting enjoyed a student to teacher ratio of 19 to 1, whereas the 12% special education population was forced to sit in classrooms of 25 or more, though each of these classes had a regular education and a special education teacher. The state rated OMS as Under Academic Review, which meant that the school hadn’t been able to show enough yearly progress in either reading or math over the past two years. Based upon No Child Left Behind regulations, students who were classified as low income, special education, and African-American had been unable to meet the State’s academic standards. The state had not had to place any school Under Academic Review as of yet, but OMS faced being the first one, an honor no one at the school wished to receive.

The school staff had created two cultures in the building. One was of mostly younger teachers with five or fewer years of experience. These teachers had known nothing else but the state assessment and had found ways to utilize it for instructional purposes. The second group of teachers who had 10 or more years experience was admittedly against the state assessment and refused to accommodate their instruction in ways that the data suggested would help students improve. The rest of the teachers in the building gravitated toward one culture or another based upon the team they taught with.

Morning Greetings

Mrs. Scotten stopped by Mrs. Barber's office first thing upon arriving at school. Since Mrs. Barber, the school counselor, was also the school's test coordinator, the students she counseled were put on hold during test season. As Mrs. Scotten signed her name on the check out sheet, she asked Mrs. Barber how she was doing.

"Things are fine for now, but that will change once we start testing," she responded.

"What do you mean?" replied Mrs. Scotten.

"Once testing starts, I will begin to get a steady flow of students complaining about how they feel. Some are just faking it, but most complaints seem to be legit. These poor kids are feeling tremendous pressure from this test and us." Mrs. Scotten thought of Billy's meltdown last year. The next question from Ms. Barber caught her by surprise.

"So, are you doing okay with this mess?"

"What mess? What do you mean?" inquired Mrs. Scotten.

Ms. Barber rolled her eyes, "You know, the state test."

Was it that obvious to Ms. Barber that she was feeling upset? Alice thought.

Alice stammered, "Things are fine. . . I'm fine, just a little nervous about how the kids are going to do, you know, the usual stuff. Why do you ask?"

"Well, teachers are feeling the same pressure the kids are, you know. As I move through the building..." The sentence trailed off in Mrs. Scotten's head as she realized that Mrs. Barber had a point.

Before heading up the stairwell, Mrs. Scotten stopped by Judy Phillips' room. Ms. Phillips was a third-year teacher, who was well-versed on assessment and how it could be used as a tool in the classroom. Mrs. Scotten actually found a bit of career rejuvenation by befriending Judy. Usually, the more veteran teacher becomes the mentor to the less experienced. Yet in this case, Judy had really opened the eyes of many teachers in the building with her fresh perspective, especially her knowledge of assessment and how it related to accountability.

"Hey Judy, I'm a little upset over the incident with Billy last year. All this stuff about No Child Left Behind has caused me to have mixed feelings about state testing. Why do we place so much emphasis on one test?"

"Testing is a way to raise expectations for our children. It's also a way to make teachers, students, and administrators accountable."

Mrs. Scotten stepped further through the door and placed her box of testing materials on a nearby desk, "I understand the importance of state testing. It definitely helps me to measure how well my students are doing and it shows their progress. It also helps me assess my students' growth and make adjustments to my instruction."

Ms. Phillips placed one of the 28 pencils she has just finished sharpening on a desk and walked over to the sink to wash the black lead from her hands.

"But I would like to see us use more than one test to make decisions about how well our students are doing," Ms. Phillips said. "This would certainly be a better way to evaluate the students' strengths and weaknesses. It would also help me to make adjustments to my lessons to improve students' learning."

"Do you think that an assortment of tests could be used to make decisions about our students and show how well we teach?" Alice asked.

"Sure, tests like that can be invaluable in helping teachers determine gaps in students' learning. I see it this way; it would help students and teachers if tests were used only for the purpose for which they were designed. I think that it is detrimental to students when decisions

are made using the results of only one test,” Judy shared as she began to place the rest of the pencils on the student desks.

Alice reached over to pick up the box of materials, ready to climb the familiar two flights of stairs to her classroom. “I agree. If tests were aligned with state standards, we could better prepare our students to succeed and not have to worry so much about teaching to the test.”

Administrative Pressure

Suddenly, Mr. Newton, the building principal, stepped into the doorway of the classroom. “Good morning ladies, I just wanted to come by and wish you good luck!”

“Mr. Newton, perfect timing. Judy and I were just having a conversation about assessment. Quite appropriate, don’t you think?” Mrs. Scotten said as she looked at Judy from the corner of her eye with a quick smile on her face.

“Since you are here, Mr. Newton, I want to tell you that I just don’t feel as though we are doing enough to prepare these students beyond the state test.”

Judy’s words caught him by surprise.

She continued, “We focus so much on reviewing for this test.”

“If you are teaching to the standards, you are preparing them for post-secondary education and the state test,” Mr. Newton replied.

“It doesn’t seem that way. After all of the professional development on sound instructional strategies, we still spend countless hours focusing on how to respond to questions, how to write in a box, practicing state test type questions and telling the students to justify all of the responses. It takes away from the deep understanding I want my students to have,” Alice explained. “I spend a lot of time on test-taking preparation.”

“I understand how you feel,” Mr. Newton said. “However, all of these techniques will be useful in the students’ future as well. Our focus is to be sure to raise these test scores so we can meet the standards or exceed them. Once we are no longer under review, we can shift some of our focus. If we are under review for another year, we all know what can happen.”

Judy continued. “But how can we make the kids do what we need them to do? We are Highly Qualified teachers, who have earned the label. We stay after school with the students, meet with them at lunch, spend countless hours creating lesson plans that we believe will help them. What more can we do? We are always encouraging the students to do their best.”

“Well, we must continue to do all these things and more. Perhaps this year it will pay off. I know you both have done everything you can to help your students prepare for the state assessment. I’ll see you later. Good luck!” Mr. Newton scurried from the doorway and up the stairs to give his good luck “speech” to the rest of the teachers.

“He’s clueless, don’t you think?” Alice snickered to Judy.

“Well, not really Alice. I think his priorities in how he uses this assessment are dictated to him by higher powers. He’s feeling the pressure from the district office, and all they care about is how many Performance Level 1’s and 2’s we have each year. The fewer of those, the better, because newspapers write about the school! It’s a public relations nightmare for him and the district.”

In her classroom, Mrs. Scotten stared at the paper on the walls that covered the items that the state said would give her students an unfair advantage while taking the test. She remembered Billy, the student who had the meltdown in her room last year. She had seen him around this year, but he really hadn’t spoken to her much. She wondered how he would do today, especially since his performance on last year’s test completely changed his academic track. She knew he

received the lowest score on both the reading and math tests. The result was that he ended up in remedial classes this year for both those subjects. No science, no social studies, just reading and math all day. She started to think how he might be preparing for this day.

Billy

Billy was a sixth grade special education student who was placed in a regular classroom that should have had both regular education and special education teachers, but didn't due to staffing problems. The classroom consisted of 28 students, 10 who had been identified with disabilities (Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Learning Disabled, Emotionally Disturbed, Bipolar Disorder). Billy was reading on a third grade level. This remedial class focused solely on English Language Arts; his only other class was a math class in an identical setting as this one. He was there because of his performance on the state test last year, but he knew nothing was different. He was expected to do the same work as the regular education students in the class. Billy was having difficulty keeping up, often not completing the homework assigned because he had difficulty reading the material. Although his teacher was required to create alternate assignments for him as well as for the other special education students, because so many students were on different learning levels and had a wide range of goals specified in their Individual Education Plan (IEP), it was generally not done effectively. The teacher just didn't have enough time in the day.

The expectation was for Billy to meet the standards. Rarely did Billy's teacher work with him individually because of the size of the class. His mom told him the whole purpose of an IEP was to give him the special help that he would need to be successful, but it hadn't felt like it was really helping at all. As he entered the building on that day, he already knew what was in store for him.

"Just another day," he kept telling himself. But he knew better. He remembered the meltdown he had last year. It started as soon as he woke up that morning feeling sick to his stomach. He tried his best to convince his mom to let him stay home, but she wouldn't hear it. He thought about ditching school that day, but he knew the truancy officer would visit again. Looking back, he wished he would have just dealt with the officer instead, considering what happened. He was embarrassed for a long time, and his friends continued to tease him about it. "Barfin' Billy" is what some of them called him. Others asked him to have another meltdown to distract the teacher. He hated it. He hated the test, and now he hated school.

Ms. Martin

It was the third call this month from Billy's teacher about his incomplete homework. Ms. Martin was frustrated. Billy, her youngest of three boys, had so many problems. She had tried to involve Billy's father in the numerous meetings that she attended at school, but since the divorce his life was too busy. It seemed that his "new" wife was keeping him away from "old" family responsibilities. She tried to figure out what she could do next with Billy. He was so different from his older brothers, one in college and the other a senior honor student. Billy was withdrawn. She knew he felt like a failure, much like she did. She worried that Billy would push her even further away if she confronted him again on his lack of school work.

Penny Martin looked over Billy's IEP again. It had taken time to understand the scores on the tests that showed Billy's inability in decoding and math calculations. She still couldn't understand why he couldn't have a regular schedule and still get help instead of being placed in the English Language Arts and classes based on his state test performance. All of the teachers

had been very concerned and wanted Billy to succeed with intensive instruction. She called the school back and asked to speak to the special education coordinator to try and set up another meeting to discuss other possibilities for Billy's placement. She also wanted to talk about the status of the counseling that they had noted would be one of the services that he would receive. She was transferred to the guidance department and spoke with Ms. Barber who explained that state testing was consuming everyone's time and a meeting could not be scheduled for a week or two.

"I want Billy to stay home and take the tests at a later date," Penny said over the phone. The counselor told her if Billy was ill, he could make up the tests next week, but that it was important for Billy to try and come to take the tests that day. Penny asked to schedule a meeting so she could discuss it further at that time.

Testing today, planning tomorrow

"Good morning, boys and girls! Go ahead and make sure your things are unpacked, use the restroom, and pick up two pencils from the back table," stated Mrs. Scotten as she watched her students closely, wondering who would handle today well and who wouldn't. The more she thought about the situation, the more she felt sorry for her students. Before, she had never realized the challenges kids faced with this test. And to think that she had been so selfish in worrying about how these test scores would reflect on her and her performance. She knew that these students were facing some of the same pressures, but from different sources.

Testing was finally over. Mrs. Scotten had a sense of how much of a burden this week was on her and those around her; but she was not ready for what happened next. Mr. Newton had called each teacher to his office. She was not sure what it was about because she hadn't seen any of her department members recently. She had her things ready to go and headed down the stairs. As she knocked on Mr. Newton's door, she heard him on the phone.

"Don't worry, Dr. Gurode. I am in the process of putting those numbers together. I will have an estimate for you by the end of next week. There are still a few teachers I need to talk to and then things should be squared away." There was a pause. "I agree. Intervening with these Performance Level 1s now will help us get a head start for next year. Thank you." As he hung up the phone, he saw Mrs. Scotten in the doorway.

"Come in, Alice. How did things go this week?"

"As good as expected, I suppose," she said.

"That's good. No Billys this year?"

She shook her head in response to his obvious reference to what happened last year, realizing that his concerns mirrored hers.

"Well, I would like you to do a couple of things for me. Could you give me a list of potential Performance Level 1s from your class list this year?"

She looked at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Go through your list and identify who you think your PL1s will be this year based upon observed test performance. We want to get some interventions in place for the remainder of the year so that we might be able to bring them up to standards for next year."

As he continued to explain what the plan was for the PL1s, Mrs. Scotten realized what had been happening. It seemed that her students had lost their human value to the culture of Owens Middle School. Students were no longer called by their names; now these struggling students were referred to as PL1s. Listening to Mr. Newton refer to these kids by performance levels seemed to be sending a message that the school valued performance over understanding

and learning. As she left his office, she knew that something had to be done, but she wasn't sure where to start.

Discussion Questions

1. How could the two cultures (the less experienced and more experienced teachers) work together to make the school better?
2. What can Billy's meltdown help show regarding standardized testing?
3. How can Billy be put more at ease?