

You'll All Look Good on Page 39 (or else!)
By: Susan Gold, MetLife Fellow, TNLI San Francisco

6:30 Monday morning

One Size Is Gonna Fit All: A Play in One Act

(Curtain rises on a fitting room. However, rather than in a department store, it is located in a school district central office building.)

Sales person: Good morning, teachers. Can I help you?

Customer: Oh, I really don't need anything today. I'm just here to look. I have a Master's Degree in clothing design and I've been taking the advanced professional seamstress refresher workshops for five years. Actually, I make my own clothes, based on the season and the occasion.

Sales person: Well, that's not going to be possible. We want to have a consistent, professional look. How would it look if you are wearing designer clothes and the new teachers at Achievement Academy get their clothes from the sale rack at Mervyn's?

Customer: O.K., you have a point. I'll take the skirt in red, and the shirt in blue, size 12, please.

Sales person: Sorry, we decided that the entire lot should be red, size 6. That will represent us in the best light.

Customer: Oh, that will never fit! Besides, red doesn't work with my complexion.

Sales person: Well, this is what's available to you. You could work on a tan. Maybe it's time to lose a few pounds, hmm? [turning away] Sir, are you ready?

Customer: But wait! I need something that will fit...

Beep, beep, beep. Heart pounding, Eliza Carey reached for the off button on her alarm clock. This was not the first anxiety dream she had had, but one of the more memorable ones. That day, she would be launching the civil rights unit she had tailor made for her class.

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Hope Elementary School lay in the shadows of the Consolidated Center to the north, where Lake City's football team played for millions of dollars, and the Sunnydale Gardens high-rise housing project to the south, where \$250,000 worth of illegal drugs passed through weekly. Hope was a very small kindergarten through eighth grade school with a population of 170 students. The students were 99% African-American and 95% low-income. The school was a "Public School of Choice," meaning students were not assigned even if they lived in the

neighborhood, unless their parents filed a request for enrollment. A little more than half of the students came from the neighborhood, but many parents chose Hope over their neighborhood school and drove their children to school. Hope was housed in the Skyway Multiplex, home to two other schools: a middle school and a high school. The three schools operated autonomously and were not “feeder” schools, that is, students graduating from one school did not necessarily feed into the school at the next level.

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, 167 of the city’s 448 elementary schools were deemed “failing” and placed on probation. Hope was one of those, and this was their first year on probation. The school was required to implement a board-approved math curriculum, science curriculum, and a basal series for reading. While the board mandated these decisions, they provided no extra funds to purchase the curricula. In a recent presentation on NCLB, government attorney Alisa Klein told the Sixth U.S. Court of Appeals panel that the intent of the law was never to fully fund the provisions laid out in No Child Left Behind law (Ohaninan, 2006). However, states had crafted budgets with the understanding that the federal government would be funding the law’s provisions. There was no money to supplement an already trimmed-to-the-bone budget.

Eliza Carey

Eliza, a fully credentialed and, therefore highly qualified teacher, had been at Hope for five years, teaching a multi-aged Kindergarten—grade 2. The basal reading program selected by the district school board was scripted, necessitating a full set of classroom materials. Without these, Eliza could not carry out the board’s mandate. But not implementing the program could cause the school to incur sanctions if test scores did not rise. However, ignoring the mandate also had advantages. The scripted program did not accommodate the multi-age configuration of the school. Unless the entire school adjusted their reading schedules or adopted single-grade classrooms, Eliza would be forced to use the same curriculum for all three grade levels. The program mandated by the school board required two and a half hours daily to implement. To do that program for three different grades was impossible, as it meant Eliza would need to spend seven hours daily on reading while the rest of the class worked independently. It also meant relegating social studies and science to a 40-minute time slot *per week*, even if she were teaching only one grade level.

Eliza loved teaching in a multi-age classroom for many reasons. This idea was supported by research she read (Darling-Hammond, 2004) and her own experience. Because one-third of her students had been with her for two years, she knew their strengths and weaknesses, so she could build from year to year. In addition, her older students oriented her new students to behavior and achievement expectations. Giving this responsibility to her older students established a positive learning environment. Since many students entered kindergarten with little or no preschool experience, Eliza needed all the help she could get to catch them up to grade level expectations.

Eliza had been developing her own curricula for five years. She was prepared to tackle the challenge of raising her students’ test scores, but she didn’t want to use a script developed by a large publishing company in a distant city for a widely diverse population. William Ayers, one of her education professors, had written, “Teachers want to know the full measure of their students” (Ayers, 2001). She worked hard to make this ideal come alive in her classroom by checking in with the students and listening carefully to their stories. She also kept up with the latest research on meeting the educational needs of her population.

In accord with the philosophy of the school, which emphasized critical thinking, active learning, and fostering deep understanding of a subject, Eliza created and implemented her own curriculum focused on social justice. Students studied issues based on the experience and history of the African-American community and from there, made connections to broader issues of fairness and justice for all people. Her language arts curriculum was thoroughly integrated with social studies, as well as addressed the state and local language arts standards. She listened carefully to the students' voices regarding their own interests. At one point Eliza was prepared to begin a unit on the Civil Rights Movement, while her students expressed a desire to extend their current study of slavery. Eliza put it to a vote and the class, voted 16 to 2 to continue to study slavery. Responding to the wishes of the class Eliza researched a greater range of age appropriate material to deepen her students' understanding of the topic.

Standardizing vs. Individualizing

John Shaw, principal of Hope School was torn. NCLB's goals mandated that every child will demonstrate that they meet state-defined standards as measured on a standardized test by 2014. In addition, schools, using the same measure, have to show "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) overall *and* for specific racial, low income, language learner, and special education subgroups. These subgroups represented the entire Hope Elementary population. In other words, his teachers had to deliver test scores that showed student competence in the state standards, narrowing the gap between their performance and that of middle class students in suburban schools.

In his administrative training, John had done some research on testing and school accountability. He remembered reading Linda Darling-Hammond's recommendations for professional development, highly qualified teachers, and low-stakes testing (2004). In spite of what these researchers said, he felt he didn't have much control over those issues.

It was John's first year as principal, and his contract was for only one year. Previously, John had been a teacher at a similar school for seven years. The school had had five principals in the previous five years. John liked the Hope School environment for several reasons. The fact that parents chose the school meant they were involved and supportive. The teachers were dedicated, energetic, and cohesive. They were willing to experiment. He was determined to stay, but his contract renewal would be dependent on meeting the AYP criteria.

As a new principal, John was still getting to know his teachers and parent community. When he had been a fifth grade teacher, some of his African-American parents had objected to the study of slavery, arguing that it would harm their children's self-esteem. He also worried that the vast majority of other schools in the district were using the board-approved curriculum. If students transferred, they would soon find that they had not received the same kind of preparation as students in their new school. Going with teacher-created material was a risk. If student test scores improved, the curriculum could become a model and the school would be removed from its probationary status. If the scores stayed the same or decreased, the onus would be on him, and he would likely lose his job. Eliza's students had shown growth on the previous year's standardized tests, but not enough growth to meet the "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) criteria. Good curriculum takes years to develop. It must be piloted and adjusted based on student performance. John didn't have years.

In terms of the budget, the school could not afford to buy the mandated basal reading materials unless they let one of the teacher aids go. The aids came from the community. They were very active in advocating for the school at the district level in addition to providing needed

individual attention to students.

John decided he had little choice but to take a risk with Eliza's social justice curriculum. Most schools with his population of students were staffed by first year or not fully credentialed teachers, yet many of his teachers were experienced, and he wanted to keep it that way. As a former teacher, he knew he would lose them if he curtailed their independence and creativity.

The decision meant John would be monitoring Eliza's classes carefully. This created some tension between them. He began continuously asking for updates and dropping into her classroom unannounced. Eliza now felt threatened, and John felt resentful of the time he was putting into monitoring her. He was already staying late into the evening keeping up with routine job requirements.

The Parents Weigh In

"Ms. Carey," the woman puffed a little from the steep climb from the street to Eliza Carey's classroom. "Jasmine just can't stop talking about the dance she will be performing. She's even asking me if I ever met Harriet Tubman. I had to tell her, 'I'm not that old, honey,'" She guffawed amiably.

"I've certainly noticed a change in her attitude," Eliza responded, smiling. "She finishes her math fact sheets more carefully now that she knows she can't rehearse until she has at least 85% right. I hope you'll be able to make it to the performance on Thursday evening, Ms. Johnson."

"I surely will be there. I'm bringing her cousins from over there on Linden Street, too."

"How exciting for Jasmine! Well, I'm looking forward to meeting them. Thanks for your support."

Moments like these made teaching worthwhile. Eliza had been a little concerned over how the parents' would respond to the new approach, but 14 of the 18 surveys she sent home came back. Of those, 12 were enthusiastic. Then there were the other two responses. One parent had been concerned that a nephew in another school was getting a very different curriculum. She wrote, "We might be moving out of the neighborhood. I want to make sure my child is going to be able to fit in at the new school. We didn't have any of these plays and projects and I did just fine in school." The second had questioned the necessity of teaching about "those times of struggle." She wrote, "I want my child to feel empowered to face the future. Learning about all the hardships people went through might make him angry and bitter. I know things are going to be hard for him and the last thing I want is for him to be worn down by negativity."

Eliza reassured the first parent that the same standards applied to both the district curriculum and her own, but the doubts lingered. It was true that once the children had experienced the freedom of a project and performance-based program, they might not adjust well to scripted, text-oriented methods. For the second parent her answer wasn't as easy. The children are asking to study this topic. I think the curriculum accommodates them, she thought.

The Board's Dilemma

The Lake City Public Schools were in a sensitive position. Urban school districts in the United States have diverse populations. Their demographics include large numbers of recent immigrants and low-income families. Since preschool programs have been severely cut, many children come to school under-prepared and fall further and further behind each year. In addition, recruitment of experienced teachers is difficult. Fully experienced, credentialed teachers tend to leave urban districts and other schools with low-income demographics. There is little incentive to

stay in the inner city with a population under high stress levels when jobs are available in less challenging locations.

Schools in urban districts are particularly susceptible to sanctions based on NCLB requirements. In response to this situation, the Lake City Board of Education, like many boards across the country, responded to the teacher preparation issue by adopting scripted curricula. A teacher can stand in front of the classroom and deliver the reading program to her students without investing hours of research and development of individualized curriculum. Besides, there is evidence that, at least at the inception of the program, African-Americans, Latinos and English Language Learners, the subgroups focused on by NCLB, showed growth in test scores. However, there seemed to be a drop off in growth in subsequent years. There is a great deal of transience and attendance problems in urban schools, and the decline in achievement after the first year may be attributed to these variables. Standardizing curricula across the district enabled the school board to create some kind of consistency in their delivery of curriculum and made monitoring of schools' progress simpler.

Dilemmas

Eliza Carey thinks she has addressed student's academic needs by motivating them with relevant curriculum. However, she is concerned that their standardized test scores will not reflect the progress she has seen in her classroom. Her interactions with the principal, who seems to question her every move are wearing her down, as well as the hours she puts in researching and creating new curricula. Sometimes she wonders whether it's worth it and if she shouldn't respond to her mother's entreaties to get a job in the suburb where she grew up.

John Shaw also worries. He wonders if he should make the necessary budget adjustments to buy the curriculum mandated by the district. He feels like he is fighting on two fronts. So far he has not heard any grumbling about Eliza's curriculum from parents, but he knows his accountability lies in the AYP results. Sometimes he thinks he should move into a policy position, although he knows he will miss the daily interaction with a school community.

Discussion Questions

1. What changes to NCLB would address the dilemma Eliza and John face?
2. What are the messages and assumptions about learning that NCLB sends the education community, the policymakers, and the taxpayers?
3. What are ways the community can be energized to address the tensions the school board, the school administration, and the teachers face?
4. How can well-prepared, experienced teachers be recruited to low-performing schools in urban districts?

References

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- Darling-Hammond, L. (2004). Standards, accountability, and school reform. *Teachers College Record*, 106(6), 1047-85. Retrieved June 20, 2007, from http://www.susanohanian.org/show_nclb_news.html?id=648