

Pedaling as Fast as We Can and Getting Nowhere!  
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*Wednesday, 6:20 a.m., Caterpillar Elementary, Southern County School System*

It was still dark when James pulled into the parking lot at Caterpillar Elementary. “Good morning, ladies,” he commented as he cut through the kitchen to get into the school. James usually got to school earlier than everyone except the cafeteria workers as he always had a few irons in the fire to take care of before the students arrived.

“Good morning, Mr. James,” replied Gladys, one of the cafeteria workers, “My boy Terin studied hard for his math test today! You let me know how he does!” Terin was Gladys’ fifth-grade son in James’ math class.

“I sure will, Gladys! You know, in my 16 years of teaching, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a student study as hard as your Terin does.” And it was true. James knew that Terin went home to one of the most academically supportive households in the county. This was in spite of the fact that neither Gladys nor her husband had finished high school.

As James walked away, Gladys commented to the other cafeteria workers, “That Mr. James sure does work hard. You know, even teachers at other schools have told me that he is the hardest working teacher they know!”

James liked this time of the morning, his time to plan the day without any interruptions. Okay, he thought, as he walked through the dark hallways, what am I doing this morning? I’ve got that action research meeting to plan for. I have to finish the report on the afterschool program. I need to translate that letter for Deidre (the principal), and then check on my students’ progress monitoring tests. James was the only breadwinner for his family and as such, he took every opportunity to earn extra cash. Thus, he was involved with the local university’s Center for School Improvement as well as teaching in an after-school program.

He fumbled with his keys, juggling papers and books from one arm to another as he tried to unlock his classroom door. Just as he was about to drop everything, he heard a familiar voice say, “I got it.”

It was Erick. Erick was the science teacher on James’ grade level. He had six years of teaching experience and was a fantastically innovative teacher.

James teased Erick, “What are you doing here so early? I didn’t think your car ran until it got light in the morning.”

Erick began, “I wanted to get in here early to figure out what I’m doing. This is starting to be a rough year. I just found out something that’s got me upset....you got a minute or are you busy?”

“No, come on in. What’s up?”

“Well, to be honest, I don’t want to do this anymore. We’ve talked about this before. I’ve got into this business to teach kids, and I *really* like teaching kids, but it’s not about that. I got to remember to separate my job and my calling—and I don’t know if I want to anymore.”

“I know, I know, you want to teach but that’s not what it’s about, is it? It’s about making sure you cover all those benchmarks before test time and that you put the little checkmarks next to each one on the calendar. I know, I get the same feeling, but hey if they want to pay you to do that....”

“Yeah, that too, but that’s not it. You know, I didn’t get the STAR money. Did you?”

STAR stood for Special Teachers Are Rewarded. In 2006, the state legislature appropriated \$147.5 million to be distributed to school districts based on each district’s portion of the total state kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade base funding. This money was appropriated for performance pay rewards for teachers.<sup>1</sup>

“Um, no, I didn’t.” James was a little embarrassed. “But why not? Weren’t your test scores better than the state average?”

Erick’s face turned red at this point, and he pounded his fist on the desk, “Exactly! My kids scored higher than the state average. In fact, I had more high-scoring students than the university school that is always telling us how to be better teachers. But do you know how they evaluated me?”

James was unsure at this point but he knew it had to be something crazy to get Erick this upset. Erick was the most levelheaded and consistently calm person James knew. “Not exactly, how did they evaluate you? Aren’t they supposed to compare the test scores from last year with those from this year, and if your students made more growth or scored better than the other teachers in your ‘silo,’ then you get the money?”

The truth is that the state legislature required each school district to develop a plan in order to decide which teachers would “earn” the bonus money. The plan had to meet the approval of the state department of education. The county in which James and Erick worked had submitted a plan that stated a minimum of 25% of the instructional personnel at the elementary, middle, and secondary schools will be provided a 5% bonus” provided they met the other STAR plan criteria. The plan further stated that each instructor would be placed in groups called silos with other similar instructors. For example: elementary science teachers were placed in a silo with other elementary science teachers. Each silo was assigned specific pre-tests and post-tests—the comparison of which would amount to 50% of each teacher’s evaluation.<sup>2</sup>

“That’s how it’s supposed to be done. That’s something else I hate... that word: ‘silo.’ I mean, couldn’t they think of another name for the group of teachers I am competing against... the only things I know of that are in silos are missiles and grain. I guess I’m a missile ‘cause they shot me! Listen, James, here’s how they evaluated me. You’re not going to believe it. I teach science, right?”

“Yeah, you’re a great science teacher!”

“Okay, whatever, but here is what they did to me. They took my students’ scores from the state science test, and get this: they didn’t have a test from last year to compare them with. So do you know what they did?”

“No, what did they do?”

*“They compared them with last year’s reading test!”*

James was stunned and sat silently for a minute taking it in. How could it be that a science teacher could be evaluated by comparing the results of the science test with those of a reading test?

Erick continued, “But it gets better, you know the new 70,000 dollar computer program that the county bought for our progress monitoring?”

“Yeah, I use it just about every week, it’s kind of a pain, but hey, if they want me to use it and they’re paying....”

“Well, because I didn’t do so well on my evaluation, it’s been strongly suggested to me that I need to use it regularly.”

“Well, I don’t think your evaluation was fair but I use the program—”

Erick interrupted, “Exactly, you use it because you teach math. Karen uses it because she teaches reading. I’m told to use it because I teach science, but *it isn’t set up for science*. It doesn’t have the tests for all the benchmarks and the lesson resources aren’t there!”

“No wonder you’re upset. Erick, you are a super teacher. The kids love being in your class. I remember that Karen told me her son was bored with sixth and seventh grade science because he learned it all in your fifth-grade class.”

About the time that James finished saying this, he began to hear noises outside his classroom door. The kids he had promised to give some extra help were waiting to be let inside.

Erick stood up, pushed his chair in with a disgusted sigh, and muttered, “Yeah, well on top of that, I just figured out that I can make more money driving a truck like I used to. Ya know, a guy I teach karate to has his own rig and he makes more than I do with fewer hassles. I’ll see you at break.”

“Don’t forget we have an IEP meeting at break time.”

“Isn’t that wonderful.”

As Erick left, James began thinking. I wonder if I could do something about that evaluation process. It just seems so unfair. And with that thought he opened the class door and let in the three students who were waiting for extra help in math.

*Wednesday, 5:30 p.m., Adult Education Center*

“Jenny, did you get that STAR money this year?”

“What’s that? I’m not sure if I did or not, but if it’s available I’m sure we got it,” replied Jenny smiling.

Jenny and James had been teaching together for years and despite the fact that Jenny was a media specialist at Southern High School and James was an elementary mathematics teacher, the two had become fast friends. They both constantly searched for ways to augment their teaching salaries and as a result had found themselves sharing an after-school job. The computer assisted student education program allowed high-school students to earn extra credits or to make up credits that they were missing after school. The program ran two days a week for three hours a day. Jenny and James had taught the program for six years and constantly brainstormed new ways to earn money for their families.

“STAR is the Special Teachers Are Rewarded program that the Governor pushed through the legislature last year, you know, it’s the latest version of merit pay,” scoffed James as he filed the attendance papers for the day.

“You know, I don’t think anyone at my school got that money. Would we know already?”

James became hesitant because it was obvious that Jenny hadn’t received the bonus money because he had known for a month that he had received it. “Um...yeah, at least I think that at my school everybody who got it knows... but I don’t think that there’s a general announcement or anything like that.”

“Shouldn’t that be public record or something like that? I mean, I’d like to know who got it at my school. Did you get it? How do they figure that out anyway?” Jenny was angrily punching the power buttons on the computers that they used for class.

“Yeah, I got it. But I don’t know how. I mean, I know that my test scores showed my kids had more growth than Mike’s kids at New Town Elementary, but he had more high-performing kids and that’s a huge component of our school grade.” James had finished the attendance and began to move toward the door. It was still light outside and he wanted to get home and spend time outside with his wife and daughters before it got dark. “I know that test scores are a big part of how you get STAR money, but I’m not sure exactly how they figure it out. Look, you don’t even give the state test, so how can they evaluate what you do. I mean I know you are a super teacher... look at what you did with National Board Certification.”

Jenny was not mollified, “So who else got it, and what did I do wrong that I didn’t get it? Look, I’ve spent 30 years in this system. I was Teacher of the Year last year at my school, I spent umpteen hours tutoring for free and I’m National Board Certified! Why didn’t I get the bonus?”

“I don’t know, Jenny. You do so much for our school system. I mean, who set up the radio station that the kids run? You did! Who sponsors the Fellowship of Christian Athletes year after year? You do! If it were my decision, you’d surely have gotten the bonus.”

Jenny and James stood outside the door to the classroom while Jenny locked up. As he began to walk around the building checking to see that the doors were locked, he hollered out to Jenny on the other side of the building, “Hey, you blew the doors off of National Boards and I didn’t even pass it. I know you’re a good teacher.” When James came around the side of the building, Jenny was sitting beside Wanda. Wanda was a 17 year-old girl enrolled in the after-school program. She was four months pregnant and trying very hard to get ahead in her credits so that she wouldn’t fall behind when the baby was born.

“Wanda’s ride isn’t here yet,” said Jenny, who began to calm down. “I know you want to get home to your kids. I’ll wait with her. You go ahead.”

“Are you sure? I could hang out for a few minutes.”

“No, go ahead. Wanda was just telling me about what’s going on in her life, and I want to hear the rest of the story.”

“OK, look, I’ll see you on Friday then.” As James walked toward his car he thought to himself. I’m not the only one who knows Jenny is an excellent teacher. The kids know it as well.

### *Wednesday, 6:30 p.m., James’ House*

James turned off the ignition of his subcompact car and looked toward the house where his wife and children waited. They had lived in the two bedroom, two bathroom house since they had been married. As he exited the car, he called out to his wife, “Patty, do you remember how much money we got from the STAR program?”

“I think it was about \$1,500. If you really need to know, I can look it up.” Patty had their younger daughter by the hand as she greeted James at the door.

“No, that’s close enough. You know, I was talking to Erick and Jenny today and neither one of them got that money. Jenny is really upset about it, and I think Erick might

be ready to quit teaching. That'd be a real shame because he is probably the best teacher I know."

The family walked into the house and, while James poured a glass of iced tea, Patty sat at the kitchen table and said, "I don't much care about them but I am sure glad that we got it. It's only fair that with all the extra work and effort you put in that we should get something extra." She took a sip of James' iced tea and then continued. "Don't you think that you should get more pay when you produce better results?"

James leaned back in his chair and said, "Sure I do, but the way they have it set up is like saying only 25% of our teachers are good and the rest are bad."

Patty seldom disagreed with James but just the past week she had read an article in the newspaper about the STAR plan and she was ready to share its details with him. "Look," she began, "I just read this article about a study that the University of Florida did. This economist, David Figlio, says that 'pay incentives for teachers had more positive effects on student test scores than other school improvement methods such as smaller class sizes or stricter classroom attendance requirements.' I think it's got to be a good way to make our schools better. It's offering a reward, not punishing anybody!"<sup>3</sup>

James was tired and in no mood to think about it anymore. "You may be right; I think I'll talk to the boss tomorrow. Let's eat, I'm starving."

*Thursday 5:00 p.m. Caterpillar Elementary*

"Did you decide what you wanted to do for your inquiry project?" James was talking to Johnny, one of the teachers he was coaching this year in teacher inquiry.

"I'm thinking about looking at how merit pay plans reduce collaboration and increase competition among teachers in schools. I found a study from England that says merit pay plans are counter-productive in that they often result in teachers concentrating on borderline students to increase their performance without an increase in overall effectiveness. The research isn't really clear though because the same study shows that student attainment levels can really be improved by an increase in competition between teachers."<sup>4</sup> Johnny had discovered one of the truisms in education: there are few clear-cut answers.

"Johnny, that's a fascinating subject. If you will write it up and e-mail me it to me, I promise to look it over this weekend." Coaching inquiry was another iron James had in the fire to make a few more dollars to support his family.

He grabbed the letter he had translated from his desk and walked briskly through the empty halls to Deidre's office. Oh good, he thought, she was working in her office. So many times, she was called out of her office to handle emergency situations, or otherwise put out the countless metaphorical fires that happen in an elementary school so it was never a sure thing that she could be found in her principal's office.

James knocked on her open door and said, "Hey boss-lady, can I talk to you for a few minutes?"

"Sure, come on in." Deidre stopped working on the scheduling problem that had been nagging her all week and turned to speak to James. "What's on your mind?" Deidre had become principal at Caterpillar Elementary five years earlier and each year had left her looking and feeling more and more worn out. Lately, she had begun to wonder if it was worth it. Sure, she had made "tremendous improvements" to the school, but it was a constant fight and the race never finished.

“Look, I got a question that I’m not really sure we can solve; in fact I don’t even know if there is a solution. So I’m just going to spit it out. I was talking to Erick yesterday and I find it really incredible that his evaluation was based on the results of the reading test from last year compared to those of the science test this year. What’s up with that?” James had forgotten the letter in his hand but soon remembered and said, “By the way, here’s that letter for the Cueva-Ibanez family. How long has it been since they moved here from Peru.”

Deidre replied, “I think they’ve been here about a month. But I’m not exactly sure.” She trailed off in thought, and then suddenly said, “Take a look at this,” and handed James a manila folder.

James took the folder and began to leaf through its contents. “Is this from the state department of education?”

“Yes, yes it is. We just got it yesterday at the principals’ meeting. It kind of goes along with what happened to Erick. You know that we are one of only six counties in the state that are going with DOE’s new plan for merit pay, right?”

“The new one...not the STAR plan...wait, I remember something about it. They said something like that at the last union meeting I went to. I guess all the larger counties have enough money to develop their own merit pay plans so they opted out of the state’s, right?”

“That’s right, except that if we opt out we still have to come up with the money to pay out to the teachers. If we stay with the state’s plan, we can just pass their money through to the teachers who get the bonus. But they’ve decided to make it harder now.”

“I’m sure they’re trying to solve an important problem,” replied James sarcastically.

“Well, actually they are. You know what happened to Erick, right. He wasn’t the only one. Did you ever think about how the PE coaches get evaluated? What about the welding instructors at the high school? And you know our health academy, right? There’s no state test for that either. So even though they have an award-winning, state-recognized program, they might not get the bonus money! So, what has the state ordered us to do now? We, as a county must develop an exit exam for each course that we teach. It’s a nice idea, but there is no funding from the state. It’s a huge bone of contention right now!”

James thought for a minute and responded, “What about teachers like Mick, the high-school agriculture teacher? Doesn’t he keep students for several years in a row? Could he give the same test to students he has had one year that he gives to those he has had for three? That doesn’t sound very fair.”

“It’s not fair,” answered Deidre, “You know, I am all in favor of accountability, and I like the state test. It’s driven us to a higher level of success than we have ever achieved before.” Deidre was right. The first years that the schools were graded, Caterpillar had done poorly. However, with each succeeding year, the school had earned better and higher grades. And the school grading system along with the STAR plan were two tools that had helped foster that improvement. Along with the old school, Deidre had inherited many tenured teachers. Most of them were fine teachers but there were a few who had honestly been teaching for too long, with too little enthusiasm. The STAR plan allowed her to inject some motivation into those veteran teachers and offer an incentive to the newer teachers who were interested in trying innovative approaches. “When I took

over here, the staff was demoralized and everybody seemed to think that there was no way that a school with our demographics could ever earn a grade higher than a D. Well since then we have implemented the reading and math initiatives, reworked our school-wide discipline plan and involved our parents more than ever, and guess what? It has worked! Our scores have jumped, and last year we earned our first A. But that's not enough because it seems like once we got the system figured out, they made it impossible. Each year, there is more and more micro-management from the department of education. Now we have a whole new plan! The STAR plan wasn't perfect but it was something we could work with. It was a tool I could use to get some of my staff moving. I liked it. I like the idea of merit pay. What I don't like is more and more hoops to jump through from the DOE with no more money to pay for the extra mandates."

"I know the feeling, Deidre. It seems like when I started teaching 16 years ago I had a lot more money than I do now!" James straightened his copies and put a staple in their corner and then suddenly looked up and said, "You know, last year the director of administration told me that he thought the politicians in Washington really wanted to destroy public education. They couldn't do it outright, but they sure could make it a really unpleasant profession. It seems that with this STAR program, the unfunded mandates, the unjust salaries, and the ever-increasing workload that they have done just that." He thought in silence for a minute and then said, "No, it couldn't be that... I'm sure no politician is that smart!"

#### Discussion Questions

1. What defines a good teacher? Is it high test scores? Is it student growth? Should there be one overriding measure of teacher quality? Should teachers receive consideration for attaining National Board Certification?
2. If a teacher's students perform well on one measure but poorly on another, should the higher measure be used for evaluation? If a higher scoring measure could have been used, how would that impact teacher performance and teacher morale?
3. Can standardized tests be used for every evaluative situation encountered in schools? Is it desirable to do so? Should each school/county have its own "end of course" examinations?
4. How else (other than pay incentives) can we motivate less successful teachers?

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<sup>1</sup> Special Teachers Are Rewarded (STAR), Legislative Budget Item 2006-2007, Technical Assistance Document, June 13, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Special Teachers are Rewarded "STAR Plan 2006-2007, Dixie District Schools, Cross City, Florida

<sup>3</sup> STAR Plan Divides Educators, Deborah Ball, Gainesville Sun, January 11, 2007

<sup>4</sup> Competition Within Schools: A Case for Re-targeting Educational Policy? Nick Adnett and Peter Davies, Institute for Education Policy Research, Staffordshire University, Paper presented at the annual conference, European Educational Research Association (EERA), Lisbon, Portugal, 11-14 September 2002