

“I Hate School”

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September PTA Meeting

Tonight was the first PTA meeting of the year - the first meeting since the test scores were published in the newspaper, and the letters had gone home to parents. The principal, Mr. Spike, felt the pressure. He had been in grueling meetings with the district superintendent and curriculum director for days. Yerba Buena Elementary was in the district's poorest neighborhood, with the exception of one affluent housing tract close to the university. Yerba Buena's test scores rose last year, but not enough. One subgroup was still 4% below making the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) goal for the year. According to NCLB, at least 24% of each ethnic subgroup had to score “Proficient” or above, which was approximately 78% correct on the language and math standardized tests. Only 20% of the Hispanic subgroup, most of them English Language Development (ELD) students, had scored “Proficient.” One of the sanctions NCLB mandated was that Yerba Buena had to mail letters to parents giving them the top option of transferring their children out of the school and into schools with higher test scores.

The district office wanted to know what Mr. Spike planned to do to improve Yerba Buena's scores. Parents did too. Some families had transferred a week after the letters went home. Mr. Spike knew tonight's PTA agenda would not focus on the Welcome Back Dinner or the Winter Sing. It would be on test scores. It might mean the very survival of the PTA.

Mrs. White, the wife of a biophysicist at the local university, had seemed fidgety all during the routine opening of the meeting. Usually outgoing and sociable, she had been avoiding eye contact with everyone, especially the principal. Finally, she cleared her throat and spoke up, still looking down at the tabletop.

“I have to resign my post as PTA Vice President. My husband and I have decided to transfer our daughter to Hillview. As you know, we've always believed in the ethnic diversity here at Yerba Buena. We have been amazed at how much Spanish Lilly can speak without even having classes in Spanish, just learning it from the other children. But now that we see the results of the school's test scores, we just can't leave our Lilly enrolled here. Lilly's scores are fine, so far. But who knows what will happen as she moves into fifth grade. I've observed classes here and at Hillview. At Hillview, there is more art, music, drama. Here most of the emphasis is on the remedial students and English learners. So we have asked for a transfer.”

Now it was Dr. Zen's turn. “Many of us are concerned. We want to know just exactly how our children's needs will be met.”

“My wife helps out in the classrooms,” Zen continued, “and we've noticed that all the aide time is spent on the slower students. Our children are often asked to work alone, read silently when they finish their work. They are good students, but they need to be challenged too. Instead, they are often bored. We want to know what you are doing for the higher, gifted students. So far all we see is the Gifted and Talented class that meets for one hour a week, which is just too little.”

The ball was in Mr. Spike's court. He knew this could just be the tip of the iceberg. He didn't want his school to be the Titanic. He had prepared maneuvers. “We have designed instruction this year with your very concerns in mind. One hour a day in Language Arts, we will have ‘rotation groups’ with differentiated instruction. Each grade level is working out different programs for each of the three levels. We will be testing all week to determine who will be in each level. The teachers are working hard at developing three very distinct programs. The more ad-

vanced groups will be doing computer PowerPoint presentations, while we give the other groups more practice with targeted skills they need, such as grammar.”

The parents leaned their heads together, whispering, nodding, shaking heads. It was Mrs. Buck, wife of a local attorney, who finally answered. “I know I said I would be the fundraising chair for the spring carnival, but I am also considering a move. An hour a day of differentiated instruction doesn’t do it, but at least you’re trying. I’ll observe the language groups, but I’m giving notice that you may need a replacement for carnival chair.”

The whispers and side bar comments continued...

September Staff Meeting

“Staff,” Mr. Spike began, “while we’re waiting for the rest of the staff to get here, Mrs. Enaro has something she’d like to share.”

Mrs. Enaro had been teaching for 20 years at three different schools in the district. She was known as the teacher who taught the most art and put on plays. At first, Mr. Spike was worried how she would fare at Yerba Buena since she was not bilingual, but she had somehow managed to raise her class test scores every year. He wondered how, with all the time she spent on art.

“This summer I spent a week at the San Francisco Art Institute,” Mrs. Enaro began. “My daughter is a music professor at the conservatory there. It was a whole week of discussions about how important the arts are, and how effective integrating them into other subjects can be. I’ve copied off one of the papers for you all to read: ‘What does it mean to educate the whole child?’ by Nel Noddings. She has a lot to say about teaching values, community, versus the emphasis on NCLB and testing. . . .”

The principal interrupted, “Thank you, Mrs. E. I’m sure we’ll all want to read it. Now, today’s main topic is the school’s new ‘Program Improvement Plan’ that the Site Council is working on. We’ve had three meetings and have some changes. No Child Left Behind legislation has regulations we have to meet. There will need to be quite a few changes. We’ll need more on-going assessments. And we’ll be dividing the students into leveled groups for differentiated instruction at their own level for two hours each morning. We’ve mapped out a plan for Language Arts.” He passed out a schedule and a list of assignments.

“Mrs. Enaro,” Mr. Spike went on, “you’ll be taking the fifth grade below basic level. I’m going to let Joan tell you about the new program she has for remedial groups that she is really excited about. She has been piloting it in her English Learners group, so I’ll let her show it to you.”

Joan stood, her short hair perfectly groomed, posture straight. “Yes, it’s called ‘Back to Basics.’ It is designed for fluency and basic comprehension. The booklets come in seven levels, so we can test our students and place them in the booklet designed for their instructional level. My ‘below basic’ sixth grade leveled group is working on grade two sheets. Everyday, they read one passage out loud to a partner three times and clock each other. They make graphs of their times and see that the third time is much faster than the first. That’s excellent progress.”

Ms. Enaro gasped. “Mr. Spike, with this schedule and rotations, I don’t see where my integrated literature program will fit. It’s so important that my whole class read our books together so that everyone can do the projects I tie in with social studies.”

“I know you are disappointed,” Mr. Spike answered, “but it has to be this way. The state and district have made it clear. Everything else takes second place to getting these kids to be able to read on grade level. In Sacramento, they are just putting social studies on hold all together.”

Ms. Enaro's eyes widened, and her heart sank. How could that work if the class were broken up into different groups?

Perhaps, Ms. Enaro thought to herself, she could show Mr. Spike that other study from the arts conference - Birchard's research (2005), "Helping Students Develop," where Birchard motivated students with oral shared literature the same way she does.

September 30

It was 6:00 p.m. Mrs. Enaro was still in her room working late, when there was a knock at the door. Jose and his mother, Mrs. Santos, were outside.

"*Maestra*, you talk? I worry Jose. I bring Jose. We talk."

"Of course, come on in. Hi, Jose. What is it?"

"*Maestra*, I no know what to do. Last year, Jose bad report. Grades *baja*, low. Report card say no good read. Jose read. He read mail, doctor things, all things for me. He read *bueno*. Good read."

"Well, yes, Jose does read. I'm glad he is a big help to the family. But I'm afraid that it is also true that Jose reads two years below grade level. Most of the class can read "*mas difficile*"—harder words, harder books. Even though he's in grade 5, the tests show he reads at grade 3 level. He really needs to read more books at home to catch up and learn more English words. He should read 30 minutes everyday, at least one whole book a month."

Mrs. Santos answered slowly, "I know teacher all say make *mi hijo* read at home, but he no like. I try, I say go read, but Jose just play video games. How make him? I no can read. I no can ask questions."

"Jose, when you're home, where do you do your reading, your homework?"

Jose had been sitting quietly beside his mother, head down, looking at his purposely untied shoe laces. "Mostly I sit on our bed but sometimes I go in the hall 'cus there's a light in there."

"Is it quiet in there, in your room, or in the hall?"

"Well, no. Me and my two little brothers and sister, we share a room. They're always messin' around. They take my stuff, and their stuff's all over in the way. Usually the TV's on in the living room and it's kinda loud."

Mrs. Santos broke in, defensively, "*Si*, I know, *Maestra*. I try tell his father, turn down TV, but he get mad. He say, Jose no read at school? We busy at night. *La Escuela* is for read. He no read books at school?"

A Week Later: School Library

Mrs. Enaro noticed Jose fooling around in the back of the library when everyone else was in line to check out a new library book. "Jose, why aren't you in line? Where's the library book you're checking out? It's almost time to go back to class. You need your book for Class Silent Reading and your home reading. You have to do one book report a month, remember?"

Jose had his head down, and his hands in the pockets of his baggy pants, "I can't check one out. Mrs. Libby won't let me."

"Why not?"

"Well, last year I lost my library book. I left it in after-school care. Someone took it. So now I can't check out any more. Not unless I pay for it."

Mrs. Enaro took the librarian aside, and whispered, "Is it true Jose can't check out library books?"

“I’m afraid so. I sent three notices home to Jose’s mother last year, but she still hasn’t paid for the one he lost.

“How much was the book?”

“It was a hardback. Let’s see... I have it in the computer. Yes, here it is. . . \$35.”

Mrs. Enaro cringed, “But they really can’t afford that. We even had to have Angela take him to Operation School Bell yesterday. He desperately needed new shoes. His were wrapped up in duct tape.”

“I know, I know. It’s so hard. But we just have to teach about responsibility. Five years ago, the students lost 200 library books in one year. We just don’t have the funds to keep replacing them. We have the policy that parents have to sign that if their child loses a book, they will pay for it. Until the lost book is paid for, the child loses the library privilege. Since this policy has been in effect, they’ve only lost about 50 a year. It really has helped.”

Mrs. Enaro was silent as she reflected back on the grade she just gave Jose for “Independent Reading.” How had it slipped past her that he could not take a library book home to read? She knew he had no books of his own. They would never have gone to the public library. They didn’t even have a car to get there.

Yet how could she fault this school policy? Lost books are a big problem at Yerba Buena.

And here was the librarian—not really a certified librarian, but a part time library clerk—trying to keep quality books on the shelf with less and less funding.

Parent Conference, November 7

“Ms. Enaro, please, please. Have *problemo*. Jose say he no like school. Me worry. His brother, Rodrico, he stopped to go school. He no like. He no go. Now *mucho* trouble. I want Jose go school. I worry he be like brother Rodrico. Jose say school boring. He go *baja*—low—group for to read. No good. Jose no like to go out of big class. He want stay with Carlos. *Amigo*.”

Mrs. Enaro didn’t want to hurt Jose’s feelings. How could she explain it?

“Carlos is reading much more difficult words than Jose. If we make Jose read words that are too hard in front of other students, he will feel bad.”

“Jose feel bad now. Kids say he go to stupid group. He say you no let him read books. Carlos read books but not Jose. Only papers like these. He say you think he no smart.”

“Yes, these papers are workbooks on Jose’s level. If he practices reading the papers faster everyday, soon he will be able to read books.

Mrs. Santos wouldn’t give up. “What Carlos group read?”

“Well, a book. Here, I’ll show you. See? See all the words? I’ll read you some of it. You see how many hard words there are?”

Jose seemed to get braver watching his mother. Finally he chimed in, “I hate workbooks. That’s all we ever do. Carlos gets to read about Indians and a kid living all alone in the woods. He says it’s cool. “

“*Maestro*, you say it is *muy importante mi hijo*, my son, read books. You say read books help learn English, more English words, more better. Jose need read books in school. Why school no let my son read books? “

Mrs. Enaro recalled the library conversation in her mind, remembering there were no library books at home for Jose. And she thinks about Mrs. Santos’ question: Why doesn’t her son read books in school? How many books does it take to “catch up”? Will the workbooks really help him catch up?

More Help For Jose

Mr. Spike seemed happy as he greeted Mrs. Enaro. “Good news, Mrs. Enaro! The superintendent just received word that her grant was funded for an additional tutor for the targeted ‘below basic’ students. Miss Knu will be coming to pick up four of your students for more intensive language instruction. They’ll be using the latest test prep practice materials. Your fifth graders will be pulled out at 1:30 p.m. each day. We start Monday.”

Mrs. Enaro was stunned. “Afternoons? More language? But that’s our time for science and American history. How can they miss that? And music on Wednesday?”

Mrs. Enaro’s constant resistance to the new Program Improvement Plan was beginning to wear on Mr. Spike. “Well, these kids can’t read, and that has to be our highest priority. They’ll get history in junior high, and music isn’t going to get them into college.”

“Do you realize that also overlaps 10 minutes of our P.E.? Isn’t it a state mandate that we have 100 minutes of P.E.?”

Ever since NCLB “Program Improvement,” mornings were devoted solely to English and math, so she had to squeeze science, social studies, P.E., art, and music into the afternoon 1:15 - 3:00 p.m. slots, but it was hard.

Spike was at his wit’s end with this woman. “Mrs. Enaro, is P.E. on the standardized tests? Does NCLB look at the P.E. scores? How many times has our staff said how great it would be to get our struggling readers extra help? Now we have that chance. A tutor. A chance for kids to get that extra attention they need. If this helps these kids to be readers, think what a difference that will make for them in junior high!”

Mrs. Enaro reflected to herself. Did she get no voice in this? No American history? American government? That’s why she taught fifth grade. Teaching about America was her passion. To her, fifth grade social studies was the most significant portion of the entire elementary school curriculum.

Monday

Mrs. Enaro steadied herself. She would sound cheerful. “Jose, Rafael, Yazmin, Maria, would you come here, please? Today we’re starting a new program. You’ve all been doing so well to have learned so much English, we have a program that will help you even more. A new teacher will be working with you and four other kids from the other fifth grade at 1:30 p.m. every day in a small group so you will get special help. She’ll be here in just a few minutes to take you to your new class.”

A look of surprise (or was it anger?) flashed across Jose’s face. “What about music?”

Mrs. Enaro put her hand on Jose’s shoulder. “No music today, Jose. But maybe it’ll just be for a few weeks.”

“School sucks. I HATE it. I hate school.”

When the office phoned Mrs. Santos the next day at 9:30 a.m. to see why Jose was absent, Mrs. Santos was very concerned. He had left for school at the regular time, 7:30 a.m. The office phoned the county truant officer. Where was Jose?

Discussion Questions

1. How can the goals of differentiated instruction be realized without excluding the “leveled” student from opportunities and role models being offered to the other groups?

2. How can the resources of the school be preserved and yet materials made available to students whose lifestyle and support systems make it difficult for them to prevent loss of those materials?
3. Does the leveling of reading groups limit access to quality role models?
4. Does the increased emphasis of rote, scripted programs necessary for intensive test preparation limit access to the creative, enriched experience of literature and the higher-level thinking and discussion opportunities they provide?
5. Is fluency measured by speed? How does comprehension of new ideas differ from comprehension of text or number patterns seen repeatedly?
6. How does the fragmentation of a student's day, even for tutorial experiences, affect self-esteem and the overall affective experience of the child's school day?
7. If increased numbers of parents of high achieving readers react to the "school of choice" sanctions by removing their children, what will the effect of fewer reading role models have on students and overall school performance?
8. Has the emphasis on standardized testing increased the drop-out rate?

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