

Are You In or Are You Out?

By Erica Litke, MetLife Fellow, TNLI New York City

Main Entrance, 3:02 p.m.

Jayson and Tariq walked past the metal detector on the way out of the building. As they put on their belts and du-rags and took out their cell phones to text message friends, they nodded towards Jess Jones and Rosanna Sullivan, who were standing by the door on dismissal duty.

The teachers overheard Tariq as he laughingly said to Jayson, “Yo man, Ms. Mariano marked me absent *again* today. It’s not even worth showing up anymore if she’s just gonna mark me absent—she doesn’t even know who I am. I don’t know why I bother going to that class.”

Jayson high-fived the security guard at the door, turned to Tariq, and said, “Yeah, plus that stuff she makes us do is so boring. We’re never going to use it anyway. I’m not even going to go tomorrow. I mean, I’m sure she’ll fail me anyway.”

“Yeah,” Tariq replied. “Shoot, I don’t wanna go to that class anymore either.”

“C’mon man, you gotta just get through it and be out. At least you gonna graduate in June.”

Tariq rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Graduation ain’t no big thing. No one in my family graduated, and they’re all fine. Look at my uncle—he got his own business and everything. I made it further than he did in school. I don’t even give a crap anymore. I’m never using this stuff in life anyway—gotta get me outta here and working already.”

Jess and Rosanna exchanged looks as the boys passed out the front door. Jess felt like there was a rock in the pit of her stomach. She taught both boys math last year and prepared them for the state graduation exam.

“Rosanna, Jayson needs that credit to graduate. We need to figure something out. He’s a good kid, but he’s got a lot of stuff going on at home. He’s already 19. It takes him so long to learn material, if he starts skipping class he’s going to spiral downhill quickly.” Jess continued, “And Tariq—he hates school so much. I always worked really hard to engage him in class, but when he’s not engaged, he just checks out.”

Rosanna knew. She had Jayson in Physics this year and taught Tariq two years ago. She *knew* both boys and understood their level of engagement (or disengagement) well. She sighed heavily, frustrated with the idea that it was once again her job as a teacher to convince kids to care about school. Rosanna knew Jess was right, but how much more could she do for these kids? It’s not as if the real world is going to cut them any slack.

“Hang on,” Jess interrupted, “there’s Eva! I haven’t seen her in ages. She’s missed my first period class every day for a month and hasn’t been to basketball practice in a couple of weeks. Maybe the baby is sick or she’s had some childcare issues.”

Rosanna walked away shaking her head. She didn’t want to get involved. She had enough to deal with. Couldn’t Jess just worry about teaching math and getting more kids to pass the test?

As Eva approached, Jess greeted her enthusiastically, but with a toughness that the students had come to expect. “Eva, can we talk about your attendance—*what* is going on? Where have you been? Is everything okay with the baby?”

Inspiration for this case was taken from *Been there, done that: Student inquiry of high school dropouts*, an action research study conducted by Erik J. Shager, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2004. Additional research includes work done by Richard Murname and colleagues at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

“I just came from Mr. Seidman’s office.” Jess was not surprised that the principal was getting involved with Eva’s attendance. She was one of the brightest kids in the school with the highest test scores. Eva’s eyes welled up and she explained, bursting into tears, “He told me he doesn’t want me coming to school anymore. He told me to drop out and get a GED.”

General Instruction High School

General Instruction High School (GIHS) was a medium-sized comprehensive high school enrolling approximately 850 students. It was located in a hip neighborhood populated by artists and young professionals. The student body, however, came largely from the housing projects on the far side of the highway that divides the city. Due to the city’s open choice system for high school, the school was open to students from throughout the city, but many students chose to attend a school near to home. The student body was 54.6% African American, 40.8% Hispanic, 2.8% white and 1.8% Asian and other. The teaching staff was largely white. Only 3.3% of students were recent immigrants (as opposed to 13.6% city-wide).

GIHS was considered a relatively safe school with 10 criminal incidents last year (mostly against property) and 40 non-criminal incidents. The school had a suspension percentage that was roughly the same as that of the entire city. Despite this, a new city policy required students to pass through metal detectors and swipe computerized ID cards upon entry. Recent changes in school safety policies meant that the city police department supplied and trained some of the security staff in the building.

The school’s motto was “Excellence at Every Step,” and according to its mission statement, was committed to “producing responsible citizens who will become life-long learners committed to success in a democratic society.” The school had roughly 380 freshmen, but only 46 seniors. Approximately 15% of its students were classified as “ungraded,” taking classes that they need to graduate, but not having accumulated sufficient credits to be classified as seniors. In a city where officially 58.2% of the class of 2005 graduated on time,¹ GIHS graduated 48.1% of its students after four years. 16.9% of students dropped out, and 35.1% were still enrolled after four years.

In order to graduate from GIHS, students had to pass the mandated state assessments. Approximately 60% of GIHS students passed the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment with a 65% or higher and just under 50% passed the math assessment.² However, these figures have been rising steadily over the past five years. GIHS was in its second year of restructuring, having not met state and federal benchmarks for improvement.

In a city plagued by high rates of principal and administrative turnover, General Instruction benefited from consistent leadership. The principal of GIHS was a teacher in the building for ten years and an assistant principal for five years before becoming principal four years ago.

Principal’s Office, 3:57 p.m.

Sam Seidman shook his head and ran his hand through his gray hair. He sighed as his guidance counselor Rachel Rosenfeld was gathering together the transcripts and attendance

² In New York State, students must pass exams in five subject areas in order to graduate: Math, ELA, Science, US History and Global History. The Math and ELA scores are more publicized as they are used for the purposes of No Child Left Behind. GIHS has a passing rate of 69% on the Science exam, 66% on the Global History exam, and 54% on the US History exam. Passing for these exams is a 55 or higher. It is interesting to note that only 37%, 31%, and 16% pass with a 65 or higher on the three exams respectively.

reports she had pulled on Eva for the meeting. Rachel braced herself for one of Sam's now-famous "what does she expect" rants.

"What does she expect? This is crazy! Eva's had 27 absences so far this semester and has been late 73 times. Failing all of her classes isn't doing her any good. She needs to be done with high school so she can support her child. It kills me—she's so damn smart. She can run circles around most of the other kids in this school. She just can't pull it together."

Rachel stared down at Eva's transcript showing mostly Bs and a few Cs and As until she left to have the baby in April of the year before. She quietly replied, "You know, she just finally secured day care. She thought she could do it, but her boyfriend wasn't able to help out, and her mom is frustrated at her. The thing is, the daycare required a three-week transition period—so she's got to be there with the baby for three more weeks. But I'm sure after that. . ."

"Come on Rachel, we cut her a deal last spring and gave her all those incompletes. But she didn't hold up her end of the bargain. She didn't even show up to take the ELA test and she would have been one of our highest scorers! If she wanted to finish high school, she'd figure it out. Think about it; she's so smart that she'll pass the test. She could be in college by the fall and get on with her life. She should drop out, take the GED."

Rachel thought back to the study she had read about recently in her graduate program that talked about how only 30% of students who take the GED exam the first time actually pass. Didn't they also talk about how students with a GED have a lower earning potential?

Conversations like these with Sam made Rachel really uncomfortable. *She* had a couple of friends from high school who had taken the GED, but they came from well-off families. She remembered high school pretty vividly—it was only five years ago after all. Her large suburban high school had been rough social terrain for some of her friends. It had never been a question of academic ability. They left early, got a GED, and went on to good colleges.

"Getting her *into* a GED program is not the problem. It's how she's perceived afterwards," Rachel replied quietly. "We just looked at this study in my graduate class that talked about how students with GEDs earn significantly less than high school graduates. There is still a stigma associated with the GED versus a GIHS diploma."

"Well how is she perceived if she fails all of her classes and doesn't get that diploma? How are *we* perceived? If she goes to a GED program, she'll get into college and get on with her life. Even better, she's not counted as a dropout by the city. You know they're on my case about the dwindling numbers of students. They think we're only at 75% capacity! If we're not careful with the numbers who *knows* how many freshmen we'll have next year." Sam put Eva's papers into her file folder and looked at the clock. "Look, meet with her tomorrow and counsel her out. Okay, it's already after 4:00. I'm supposed to meet with the district rep about our January test scores and where we are with our Adequate Yearly Progress. We need to move on to the next kid. Whose case is next?"

Guidance Office, 5:17 p.m.

Putting away her files after her meeting with Sam, Rachel was frustrated. She couldn't help but wonder if she could have done more to advocate for Eva and some of the other students. After all, hadn't GIHS cut deals with Eva in the past? There were the incompletes; there was the agreement to move her up to the 12th grade even though she didn't have the credits from 11th grade. Sam was the one who always talked about how brilliant she was. How if they didn't cut her the deal, then she would drop out. And now he's pushing her out!

They had talked about so many students that afternoon, but Eva's case ate at Rachel the most. She had mentioned the part of the study which stated that only 11% of students who get their GED complete at least one year of college, never mind finish. She brought up Eva's boyfriend who had dropped out the year before. He started a GED course but didn't pass the test. He had hoped to enroll in a community college. But now he's working a string of part-time jobs to make money to support Eva and the baby. Then again, Eva's life outside of school won't be getting any easier any time soon. Maybe Sam was right, maybe a GED was at least better than no diploma at all.

Rachel was surprised by a knock at her door so late, but less surprised to see Jess Jones in the doorway. Jess was one of those young, ambitious teachers who came through the city's alternative certification program. Rachel liked her and was impressed by how much time she put in with students. She knew that not everyone in the building felt that way, but Rachel appreciated how Jess seemed to care about the students. Jess stayed after school to tutor her students almost everyday—despite not getting paid to do so. She also coached basketball and was always doing some crazy math project with her classes. It was so like Jess to still be in the building at almost 5:30.

“Sorry to bother you, Rachel. I know you probably want to get out of here, but I wanted to talk to you about a couple of kids.” Rachel groaned inwardly, sure that this conversation meant that it would be a while before she could go home and would probably add to her already overscheduled load for tomorrow.

“Do you know Tariq Moore and Jayson Dominguez? Rosanna and I overheard them both talking on the way out of the building today. They're worried they're failing English and are both talking about dropping out. I was hoping maybe you could talk to them tomorrow?”

Jess knew that Rachel was her best hope. The guidance counselor had a reputation for advocating for students even if it put her at odds with the administration. Despite the fact that she was supposed to be concerned with whether or not kids understood geometry, Jess found herself more and more coming to Rachel to help students deal with their lives outside of school. Without that help, so many of them didn't even stay in school.

Rachel turned to her computer to look up the two boys' records in the school's computer system. Ignoring the 52 e-mails waiting for her, she called up Tariq's record. She knew Tariq. He had worked since middle school in his uncle's funeral home. A few years earlier, a highly publicized child abuse case ended with the death of a toddler. Tariq's uncle's funeral home handled the burial, and Tariq was a minor celebrity at school from working on the case. His transcript showed him to be a solid D student. Rachel knew him more as a street-smart kid who had never particularly cared for school. He came by to say hello almost daily, but never sought out counseling. Although he lived with his mother, she wasn't much of a factor in his life. But he idolized his uncle and was planning on working in the funeral home after graduation. If he could just put in the seat time in English and squeak by, she thought he'd be fine.

She typed a few commands and soon was looking at Jayson's record. She looked his transcript over for a minute. Wow, she thought, he is a long way from graduation. He repeated the 7th grade and has been at GIHS for five years already. He *still* hasn't passed the ELA exam despite three tries. He barely passed the other exams with a 55. He'll be 20 years old in July. “It looks like if he passes all his classes this semester and next and does a couple of summer school classes, plus one more math in the fall, he can graduate by January. I guess that's not so bad. What's the problem?”

“I don’t think things are going so well in Ms. Mariano’s English class for either him or Tariq. I worked really hard to keep both boys engaged in math class, but it doesn’t seem like Mariano is keeping them interested in the class.”

Rachel sometimes worried about teachers like Jess—she didn’t mind jumping through hoops for her students, but then the kids started to expect *all* teachers to do that. Was it Ms. Mariano’s fault that she wasn’t interested in doing the same? “Isn’t it the students’ responsibility to do the work? The boys need to do what they need to do to pass,” Rachel revealed.

“But what will happen to them if they drop out? I don’t know if either one could pass the GED. Jayson’s skills are really low—I don’t think he ever got services when he moved here from the Dominican Republic in elementary school. I think he might have a learning disability. And Tariq just doesn’t seem to care enough to pass. We can’t let them drop out!”

Rachel reacted to Jess’ plea with a sigh. Another discussion about “saving kids” from dropping out. Tariq will be *fine*, she thought. High school diploma or not, he’ll work for his uncle.

But did Jess have a point about Jayson? If he is as low-skilled as Jess says, he won’t pass Mariano’s class and probably won’t graduate. Is a GED program the answer? Could he even pass the GED? And then what?

She made a mental note to find that study from her graduate class. It said something about students with low cognitive skills who drop out of high school earning two-thirds less than students who leave school with higher skills. If he did have some sort of learning disability, Rachel knew that it would be next to impossible to get him evaluated this late in his high school career. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was already 5:30 p.m. “I guess I’m not going to yoga at 6:00 p.m.,” she thought to herself.

“Look Jess, I appreciate your concern, I do. I’ll try to grab both boys tomorrow and talk to them. But if they’re determined to drop out, it’ll be hard to stop them. You should try to get out of here soon—it’s already so late.”

Jess smiled and thanked Rachel.

As she watched Jess walk down the hallway, Rachel added Tariq and Jayson to her long list of students to check in with tomorrow. She glanced up at the clock and the huge piles of files that still needed to be put away. Turning her gaze to her computer, she saw that there were now 59 e-mails waiting for her to read and reply. Tomorrow was looking like a rough day. She had a number of attendance cases to track down, three new transfer students’ schedules to work out, and Eva’s conference. She didn’t look forward to giving Sam Seidman Jess’ news about Tariq and Jayson. “Just what he wants,” she thought dejectedly, “more students dropping out. What’s wrong with GIHS anyway? Why can’t this school get kids to graduate?”

Discussion Questions

1. How should Rachel advise her students? What should she say to Sam about Tariq and Jayson?
2. Should Eva be prevented from dropping out? What about Tariq? Jayson?
3. Do schools have a duty to prevent students from dropping out?
4. Is a GED the same as a high school diploma? Should the GED be an option to some or to everyone?
5. To what degree does requiring students to graduate in four years limit students?
6. When is it acceptable for a principal to counsel students out of a school?

7. Should students be prevented from dropping out if, when they don't, they lower pass rates by which schools are evaluated?

References

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