

A Time of Test

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Mr. Seymour

Jeremy Seymour dabbed his forehead while he waited anxiously for his faculty to file into the cafeteria for the emergency morning meeting at Groves Elementary. Thoughts raced through his head. He had to remind the teachers of last year's state test scores and discuss the potential failure rates of certain groups of students. He practiced in an authoritative voice, "This is a call to action. We must serve these kids who are in danger of failing." He kept thinking about the reality that those kids who may fail also endangered the school's reputation and rank when scores were published in the local papers.

Finally, the teachers, mostly veterans with at least 10 years experience, settled down with their danishes and the meeting began. After Jeremy's "call to arms," a voice in the back asked, "Principal Seymour, are you saying that from now until March, the state test is our only focus?" Jeremy felt uncomfortable. He said, "Well, yes and no."

Throughout the discussion, the kindergarten and first grade teachers shifted restlessly in their seats. They did not feel that the state test concerned them. Students did not take the state test until second grade, and the students are not held accountable for summer school or test-based retention until third grade. At the end of the meeting, Ms. Anderson, the reading specialist, approached Mr. Seymour, "Could I meet with you after morning announcements?"

"Of course," he said.

We're a good school; our teachers are conscientious; our students achieve, he thought. Just one subgroup could bring us down.

After the meeting, as he paused at the gallery of class pictures displayed in the west wing hallway, Mr. Seymour could trace the history of Groves. It was more than apparent that the school was traditionally white. However, being located on the edge of the expanding city limits had changed the school's demographics recently. Now the school was 60% Caucasian, it tried to embrace and celebrate the diversity brought by the remaining population of Hispanic, African-American, Chinese, and Arabic students.

Mr. Seymour had worked in two other buildings as an assistant principal before filling the principal position at Groves. He was originally attracted to administration because he wanted to make a difference in the culture of the school in which he operated.

Ms. Anderson

Just then, Jane Anderson, the reading specialist, tapped on the door jamb. "Mr. Seymour, do you have a moment?" Jane was always quick with a smile and was beloved by her fellow teachers. Mr. Seymour had hired her as a reading specialist four years ago and had found her to be a reliable and resourceful person.

"Yes," Mr. Seymour smiled broadly, "come right in."

"You know that in addition to a couple of groups from the third through fifth grades, I've been working with struggling first grade students this year. I've looked at the assessments of the kindergartners, and I think that we should be more proactive. I want to pull a group of kindergartners to increase their readiness for first grade."

Mr. Seymour knew that Jane Anderson's knowledge supported her request; before becoming a reading specialist, she had been a first and second grade classroom teacher for seven years. "Do you have room in your schedule to add a kindergarten group?"

"Yes. . . well, I can adjust my groups."

"OK then, determine how you would identify kindergarten students for your group and work out a plan. We'll talk more about it on Friday. Does that give you enough time?"

"Yes, I think so." Ms. Anderson exited Mr. Seymour's office smiling.

Mrs. Russell

Mr. Seymour glanced at the digital clock. It was 9:15 a.m. He had scheduled a meeting to talk with Mrs. Russell during her planning period at 9:30 a.m. Mr. Seymour thought about the difficult topic for their meeting. Mrs. Russell had been teaching at Groves for all of her six-year career. Originally hired as a first grade teacher, Anne Russell had demonstrated incredible flexibility when she was moved to fourth grade in her second year and settled into third grade during her third year. Now, having been a third grade teacher four years, she had become comfortable with the curriculum in each of the content areas and was emerging as a young, innovative leader at Groves.

He checked his e-mail and saw a message from Dr. Cutler-Walker, the superintendent. She had called for an urgent meeting with Mr. Seymour at 11:45 a.m. "Bring your lunch. State test discussion." Rather cryptic, he thought. I wonder what she wants.

Right on time, Anne Russell walked into the room. "Hello, Mrs. Russell. We have to discuss the field trips that you have scheduled."

Mrs. Russell sat as she spoke. "Yeah, I'm really excited about the trips. We'll be taking the first one next month and then one each month for the next three months. We'll finally be supporting our social studies curriculum in a positive and effective manner—we'll go beyond the texts."

"You see—" Mr. Seymour began, but Anne interrupted.

"I'm most excited about the grant. Everything is paid for. I've been planning these trips since the grant was approved last spring." Mrs. Russell continued with eagerness in her voice.

"Uh, Mrs. Russell. I need to talk to you about the trips. There's a problem."

Mrs. Russell looked concerned. "What is it?"

"Remind me. How long will it take the students to make the movies about their field trips?"

"Of course, it depends upon the child, and I want to differentiate the experience, but I estimate that it will probably take four or five days to complete a movie after each trip."

A pregnant pause overwhelmed the office.

As he looked up, Mr. Seymour said gently, "You were at the meeting this morning. The state test is looming. We need to be sure that our students are prepared to take the test. This sounds like a wonderful idea, but—" Mrs. Russell's face fell— "social studies isn't tested. You will be spending a lot of time on these projects and that will take away instructional time for other content areas such as reading and math that *are* tested on the state test."

"But that's just it," Mrs. Russell spoke hopefully. "This project integrates reading and language arts through the movies."

"I'm afraid that this project should wait until after your students take the test. They have to concentrate on learning the basics that they need."

“But, Mr. Seymour, the first trip is to the King Tut display at the city museum. This is the first time in almost 30 years that the exhibit has been in America, and it is only here this month. We’re covering Ancient Egypt right now in our social studies class so this field trip is a rare opportunity that aligns perfectly with what we are working on in class. We won’t have this chance again.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Russell.”

“The grant was approved last spring. We’ve spent so much time making plans. We have legal obligations.”

“We have obligations to these students. You and I both know how important this test is to students and their futures. It is also essential to the reputation of the school.”

“But, Mr. Seymour, you know that I provide my students with test prep,” she said hurriedly. “You’ve observed me.” Mrs. Russell set her jaw. “Mr. Seymour, I’m disappointed. Are you saying that what I’ve been doing is not fully preparing students?”

“I’m saying that our demographics continually change, and the needs of our students change. We have to be responsive to those needs. Mrs. Russell, the trips have to wait until April.”

With a sigh of resignation, Mrs. Russell said, “But, then we’ll only have time to take half of the trips.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Russell, but this is the way it has to be.” Mr. Seymour rose from his chair.

“Fine,” Mrs. Russell clenched her teeth. “I am trying to provide these students with authentic learning experiences. I want them to do things that they will never have the opportunity to do on their own.” Mrs. Russell stared at Mr. Seymour as he looked back at her, slowly shaking his head. “I guess test scores are more important than experiences students will remember for the rest of their lives.”

Ms. Smith

Earlier that morning, Mary Smith sat at the kitchen table with a lukewarm cup of coffee. It was her first full day off in 15 days.

Josh, her nine-year-old, bounded into the kitchen full of the impossible energy that only a child possesses early in the morning. Mary said, “Why are you so happy this morning?”

Josh smiled as he picked up a stray rice puff and popped it into his mouth. “I’m just excited about going to school. Last night, Timothy said that he was worried about the state test, but I’m not. Mrs. Russell gives us lots of practice. I’m going to ace this test! Then you won’t have to worry about me going to summer school.”

Mary smiled as she wiped the counter, but her expression changed as she thought of Timothy. He was 16 and wanted to have a summer job in a few months, but he was worried about having to give up another summer for summer school. Last year, he spent most of the summer in the classroom studying to pass the state test that he had failed during the school year.

Back at School

Mr. Seymour tried to shift gears from Mrs. Russell’s disappointment. An actor at heart, he cheerfully answered the phone. “Hello. This is Principal Seymour.”

“Mr. Seymour, this is Mary Smith, how are you today?”

“I’m fine Ms. Smith, how are you?” Mr. Seymour remembered Mary Smith from Open House last year, but he couldn’t recall having seen her this year.

“I’m fine, thank you. I wanted to talk to you about Timothy. He’s afraid that he will have to give up another summer. He wants a summer job. School seems to be a dirty word for him. I’m just worried about him. I’m afraid that we won’t get out of this track.”

“I’m sorry that Timothy is experiencing trouble. Have you spoken with his teachers?”

“Yes and no.” Ms. Smith sniffled. “I’m sorry, Mr. Seymour, Josh is doing well now and I am happy with Mrs. Russell, but I just don’t want him to go through the same thing as Timothy. My oldest has already threatened to drop out of school. He’s a sophomore. I’m afraid that he’ll do it.” She paused.

Mr. Seymour grabbed his jacket, gloves, brown bag lunch, and his keys. As he was headed for the school lobby to leave for the impromptu meeting with the superintendent, he overheard a kindergarten student, Benjamin Jackson, speaking to Ms. Anderson. “You mean I’ll get to work with you?” he said hopefully.

“I’m creating the schedule for kindergarten reading groups,” Ms. Anderson said in a smiling voice.

Dr. Cutler-Walker

Dr. Suzanne Cutler-Walker paced the wooden floor of her light-filled office. She checked her watch and the clock on the wall. Mr. Seymour was not there yet. He had 10 more minutes, but she was not accustomed to waiting. As her heels clicked, she flipped through pages of test data that included projected scores. There were a few schools in the district that stood out as high-achieving and a few that were in need of assistance. “Assistance,” she said out loud and briefly laughed in an exasperated way. “More like they need a swift kick in the –“

The intercom interrupted her ruminations.

Mr. Seymour walked in smiling and extended his hand for a firm handshake. Suzanne was noted for her grip that demonstrated confidence. Jeremy sat down at the conference table, but Dr. Cutler-Walker remained standing.

The superintendent began abruptly. “Jeremy,” she said in a stern voice, “You are currently in danger of losing your state-recognized status. Your projected scores are not keeping up with Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by the No Child Left Behind legislation. In fact, in one subgroup, your reading scores are in danger of dropping for a second year in a row. Need I remind you that this reflects on the entire district?”

“In order to improve these reading scores, we need to focus your staff meetings on professional development. Evaluate the needs of your staff and design professional development opportunities to address those needs.”

“I understand,” Mr. Seymour said meekly.

“I am assigning Mr. Rockwell, the director of curriculum and instruction, to work with you on improving your test scores.”

Mr. Seymour’s eyes widened. “What will he be *doing* at our school?”

“He will be able to make some changes in your school that will ultimately help all of us. Do you have any more questions?” Dr. Cutler-Walker said curtly. “I am also implementing a quarterly performance review in order to check progress and decide if a change of course needs to take place.” She thrust the documents for the performance review at Mr. Seymour. He took them from her with a dazed look on his face.

Mr. Green

As he stepped out of his car, Mr. Seymour was met in the parking lot by Lawrence Green. “Hey, Mr. Seymour, I was looking for you. There is something I want to ask you. When are you going to start challenging my daughter? She’s gifted, but she’s bored. I understand the importance of the test, but she just keeps on filling in bubbles and practicing for the state test in Mrs. Russell’s class. Last night, she told me that she wants to quit school and take virtual classes.”

“Mr. Green, I hear what you’re saying, and I would like to talk about your concerns further. Can we do it inside the building? I’d be glad to have a meeting with you and Mrs. Russell to discuss your concerns.”

Mr. Seymour entered the lobby of the school and turned right, toward his office. He nodded to the secretary through the glass windows, and she smiled as she made a motion with her hand to her ear. Another phone call. I’ll have to check my messages.

At his desk, Mr. Seymour dialed an extension on his phone.

“Yes?” Ms. Anderson inquired over the intercom.

“I need to see you at your earliest convenience, please.”

Hearing the tone of the principal’s voice, Jane Anderson replied hesitantly, “I’ll be there in 15 minutes when I am finished with this group.”

Ms. Anderson Revisited

Ms. Anderson tapped softly on the door jamb. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Ms. Anderson, please come in.” They sat at his conference table. “I know that we had come to some agreement this morning about grouping and scheduling, but we will need to make a few changes. We’ll be taking a new direction with more emphasis on the testing grades, so I’m sorry, but kindergarten is probably out of the question this year.”

Ms. Anderson paused to gather her thoughts. “I know that the test is important, but if we continue to ignore the kindergarten students, we’ll never change the fact that they’re pushed on through the grade levels.”

Mr. Seymour frowned. “I understand your concern, Ms. Anderson. However, we have to think about our most immediate needs at this time. We simply do not have enough of you to go around, and these older at-risk students need you now.

“I know that you hate to cancel your groups, but it has to be done. Build a schedule for your groups around the classroom schedules.” Mr. Seymour looked briefly toward his planner. “I need to have the draft of your schedule by Friday. If needed, cancel some groups tomorrow so that you can meet this deadline.”

Ms. Anderson was frustrated. Suddenly she said with anger, “By the way, is there someone else who could take over my school testing coordinator responsibilities? I have figured out that my testing responsibilities take up nearly six weeks of my reading instructional time every year. That’s time away from the kids who need this extra instruction the most!”

“Ms. Anderson, you know that there is no one else on staff who could assume the testing coordinator responsibilities. Your schedule is flexible, and you have the ability to effectively and efficiently accomplish all of the required tasks. Unfortunately, the test results are very important. I know you don’t want to hear this but. . .” he paused. “The test prep materials will be here on Monday, and you need to distribute them to the classroom teachers and have them sign the district-required receipt.”

“You know, Mr. Seymour, I have to say that I wish that I could *just teach*. My instructional time keeps eroding away. I’m constantly torn between being a teacher for students who need me and performing my duties as a testing coordinator. I can’t meet everyone’s needs as it is.

Ms. Anderson stood and paused, “I understand that the test is important for a lot of reasons, but I’m not sure that I understand what has changed since our conversation about kindergartners this morning. I’m just concerned, Mr. Seymour, about our priorities. It seems we’re placing a greater emphasis on the outcome of the test than on effectively teaching children.” Ms. Anderson walked out through the office door slowly and closed it behind her.

Mr. Seymour put his face in his hands and began to think about the day’s events. How can I communicate to my teachers the need to balance time between rich curriculum instruction and test preparation? How can I encourage my teachers to challenge advanced students while they bolster the struggling students in their classroom? How can I alleviate some of the time pressures that are befalling my reading specialist?

Discussion Questions

1. What do we value?
2. How much emphasis should be placed on passing a single test?
3. How do we balance the increased value on assessment with authentic learning experiences?
4. How do we embed testing preparation with effective instruction?