

Leaving the Minorities Behind

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Mr. Thornton was a dedicated teacher at LMB for the past 18 years. He had always taught fifth grade and was in the habit of arriving early in the morning and staying late to teach his Chess Club. He implemented the club at LMB to help raise fifth grade students' math scores.

LMB was a large urban elementary school located in the largest county in the State of Florida. There were approximately 1010 students of which 1% was White Non-Hispanic, 86% Black Non-Hispanic, 11% Hispanic, and 2% Asian/Indian multiracial. The school had never made its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as mandated by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act. In order to pass third grade, the students were required to take a state standardized test called the FCAT. This test was mandated in order to comply with NCLB, with the goal that every student be proficient in reading. The majority of students who did not pass the FCAT that year were either black, Hispanic, and/or low socioeconomic status.

One Monday Morning at LMB Elementary School

On Monday, Mr. Thornton arrived early with his Mickey D's breakfast and what appeared to be at least a gallon-size mug of coffee. He was eager to start his day with his usual ritual of gulping down breakfast while setting up for class. Just as he took a sip of his coffee, an announcement came on the loud speaker.

"Mr. Thornton, please report to the principal's office."

Mr. Thornton hesitantly got up and proceeded towards the office wondering, what the principal wants now.

Repeat, "Mr. Thornton please report to the office ASAP!"

Mr. Thornton continued down the hall towards the office. He was thinking there'd better be a good reason he's being summoned to the office. His coffee and breakfast were getting cold, and he needed time to set up his classroom.

Ms. Peterson was a veteran administrator who had recently accepted the position as principal of LMB. The county demoted the previous administrator due to the fact that LMB was not able to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for the past three years. Before working at LMB, Ms. Peterson was the principal of a prestigious private school in a nearby county. Due to their privatization, that school was not held accountable to the nation's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

"Good morning Mr. Thornton."

"Hey Ms. Peterson, which one of my fifth graders messed up now?" Mr. Thornton said, half in jest. "Couldn't this wait? I need time to set up my classroom, and I sure hope you called me all the way down here for a purpose."

"I'm sorry for interrupting your breakfast Mr. Thornton, but this is about you and not your students."

"Oh come on, I didn't do anything wrong. Don't you like the Chess Club? It's going great!"

"No it's not that Mr. Thornton. I have to inform you that due to the NCLB and the class size reduction acts, we have created a new class that we'd like you to teach. These are students who have failed the third grade Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). This class will only have 18 students. However, some of these students have failed third grade more than once."

“On no! Please, Ms. Peterson, not third grade! That’s the high-stake grade! I’ll have to spend ALL my time teaching for the TEST. What will happen to my fifth grade class?”

Mr. Peterson replied, “Don’t worry about your fifth grade class. I’ll be placing a new teacher in there. I’m sorry, Mr. Thornton, but this will be effective starting tomorrow. Oh, and about that Chess Club. . . There’s no more funding for your Chess Club, since we have to put any extra funds towards reading. Clubs aren’t going to help us make AYP and, besides, you’ll be with third graders now.”

Mr. Thornton uttered, in a sardonic tone, “Thanks a lot, Ms. Peterson. You’ve ruined my breakfast and, probably, my entire school year! Am I dismissed?”

“Yes, Mr. Thornton. Remember this wasn’t personal. We think you are a great teacher, and we need a strong teacher to motivate these students because all their peers are now in fourth or even fifth grade. I’m sure you’ll work well with them. Thanks for coming down.”

Back in Classroom P3, Section 503

Later that same day, Mr. Thornton was in his fifth grade class when Johnny came in. Johnny was a fifth grade student who was top in his class and the school’s champion chess player.

“Hey Mr. T., I heard you got demoted! You’ll be teaching third grade with all those NCLB kids. Jose Martinez is in that class.”

“What do you mean Johnny? He should be at JFK Middle by now!”

“Nope, Mr. T, he’s still in third grade, and I heard you’ll be his teacher along with all those other NCLB kids.”

“Hey Johnny, what do you know about the NCLB?” Mr. Thornton asked the bright-eyed fifth grader.

“Oh, that’s easy, Mr. T. I know that every child’s be-hind is left in third grade until they pass that FCAT test! And those kids couldn’t pass so their butts are in third grade ‘til they do. Ha Ha, you’ll be those stupid kids’ teacher. Ain’t that right, Mr. T?”

It hurt Mr. T. to hear Johnny speak like that. Johnny was smart and one of his Chess Club champs. He realized how tough it must be for all those third graders when everyone, even their peers, knew they couldn’t pass the one standardized test that the government thinks makes them a fourth grader.

Beyond that thought, Mr. Thornton wondered, how could he break the news to the fifth grade students who loved him? How will he tell all of the kids that there would be no more Chess Club? He knew he was in for a bad day and, maybe, even worse, a messed up year!

At the end of the school day, Mr. Thornton leaned back, looked at the pile of papers that needed to be graded and happened to glance at a paper that his colleague, Mrs. Klein, a long-time friend, and third-grade team leader, had placed in his mail box. She had heard Mr. Thornton was moved to her grade level team and thought he might be interested in an action research report written by James (2006). He scanned it and focused on one sentence, “Since the January 2002 federal implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, our nation has made a huge investment in an effort to achieve what seems to be a worthy goal. That goal is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards as measured by state standardized tests. It is contended that this will result in the closing of the achievement gap between high and low-performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority

and non-minority students, and between economically disadvantaged children and their more economically advantaged peers.” Mr. Thornton put down the paper, and wondered about LMB.

As he was getting ready to leave for the day, Mr. Thornton heard the intercom buzz. He heard Ms. Peterson saying, “All staff members, there will be an important ESSAC meeting on Friday. Please make arrangements to attend. An e-mail will be sent out with all the details. Thank you staff.

Have a great week? Mr. Thornton asked himself. At this rate, how the heck can I have a great week, or a great school year? These were his thoughts as he jumped into his jeep.

The ESSAC Committee¹

LMB, like all schools in the district, was required to have its own Educational Excellence School Advisory Council (ESSAC) that held regularly scheduled meetings. The council’s job was to make final decisions about the School Performance Excellence Plan. The plan details how the school will improve in such areas as student performance, equipment upgrading, and FCAT preparation. The council welcomed and encouraged parent participation. The ESSAC was composed of the principal, teachers, education support employees, students, parents, and business/community representatives.

An emergency ESSAC meeting was called by Ms. Peterson on Friday at 5:00 p.m. After Mr. Thornton moved from fifth to third grade, there was apparently a group of outraged parents and students who protested the move, and others who were furious because their child was placed in the “Third Grade Retainee” class. Ms. Peterson knew she would be dealing with a lot of angry, uptight people, so she even asked security to stay late that night. Even the teachers would be angry for having to attend another meeting after hours, and she wouldn’t be able to pay them for the extra hours with all the budget cuts. Taking a deep breath, Ms. Peterson headed the meeting.

“Let me start this meeting with an update on NCLB and the support we were given from our district since the act has been in effect. LMB has more ‘Highly Qualified Teachers’ than we have had in the past. Both parents and legislators have a clear view of our performance. Our school is being held accountable to higher standards and we must communicate our results to the parents and the community. Due to the fact that we have not yet met AYP according to NCLB, we are now facing some rather harsh consequences. At this time, I would like our community representatives to share their concerns, and maybe together we can make a difference. I recognize Ms. Martinez, a parent from Mr. Thornton’s new third grade class.”

Ms. Martinez, a Hispanic parent, had a son named Jose who was held back in third grade twice due to failing the FCAT. Her son had a learning disability with an IQ score of 80 as a result of his having had the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck at birth. This caused a lapse in oxygen that went to the brain. She was actively involved in her son’s program, the Exceptional Student Education (ESE) class.

Ms. Martinez stood up to address the committee. “Ms. Peterson, please excuse me, but I don’t give a rat’s butt (forgive my French) about some government policy and the fact that we have some legislators watching us. I am one very angry mom because my child is being moved to Mr. Thornton’s third grade class!”

¹ The information about the ESSAC Committee was taken from website: http://www.dadeschools.net/newsletter/may2004/school_lingo_may.doc

Ms. Peterson replied, “Now, Ms. Martinez we have to recognize the fact that if it weren’t for the legislation, our students would be sitting in overcrowded classrooms. Instead, there are only 18 students in your son’s class, along with a very highly qualified teacher, Mr. Thornton. You are also getting free tutoring for your child through private sources funded by the government because we did not meet AYP.”

Ms. Martinez continued by responding politely to Ms. Peterson. “I know Ms. Peterson that, Mr. Thornton is a great teacher, and I am getting Jose tutored, but as a parent, I’ve got lots of issues and concerns about my son and the other kids that failed the FCAT! How well will our children adjust to third grade when their peers are in fourth and even fifth grade? What will happen to them if they don’t pass the test again? Can they or will they be left behind again? What will the school do with all these retained students? Will they be placed in classes with other retained students or will they be placed in a class with non-retained third graders? Don’t you think their odds of dropping out are greater because their attitude will suck once they reach their teens and are only in sixth grade? And these are just a few of my concerns!”

Feeling the frustration and tension rising, Ms. Peterson responded quickly. “Ms. Martinez, I recognize that the parents have a lot of questions and concerns. Some I can answer, and some I cannot. Others I hope some teachers might be able to shed some light on. At LMB, we decided to keep the students that failed the FCAT together because we were concerned that if we placed these students with third graders who have not been held back, we would have the problem of changing the curriculum for these retained students while at the same time, needing to teach the other students with the required curriculum. We feel everyone’s needs will be met this way.”

Dr. Owl, a veteran third grade teacher, who had studied research methods during her doctoral studies, interrupted Ms. Martinez.

“Ms. Peterson, Ms. Peterson, I’ve done some research and have a few statistics that might help. According to Peter Whoriskey of *The Washington Post*, ‘In Florida, as many as 14 percent of 200,000 public school third-graders in some years have been held back, most for failing to make an adequate score on the reading test.’ In Lange’s research ‘students who were two or more years older than their grade peers seldom stay in school beyond grade nine or grade ten. Not counting students with disabilities, during 2003-2004 the numbers of Florida students two or more years older than grade peers were: 17,332 for grade 8; 41,048 for grade 9; 23,693 for grade 10; 13,478 for grade 11; and 2,539 for grade 12. The number of dropouts during high school was similar for the next year. In the 2004-2005 school year, the numbers of students two or more years older than grade peers were: 16,848 for grade 8; 32,745 for grade 9; 21,728 for grade 10, 14,310 for grade 11, and 2,239 for grade 12.’ In other words, failing students based on one test is having a negative affect on our students.”

Dr. Owl was ready to go on with more numbers, but Ms. Peterson stopped her and thanked her for all that data. She then recognized Mrs. Pierre, a parent who had four children who had attended LMB.

Mrs. Pierre had a child in ninth grade who had been held back twice, once in third grade and once in eighth grade. He failed the FCAT both times. Her youngest was just starting third grade, and she was very concerned he would not pass the FCAT. She wanted to let parents know the consequences when a student repeatedly fails the FCAT. Mrs. Pierre spoke up. “Concerning students that don’t pass the FCAT a second time, according to policy, they could possibly be retained again, and when they get to eighth grade, if they don’t pass that test, they can be retained again. These students could possibly be 15 or *even older* and still be in middle school.

My oldest son Dan was held back twice, and he doesn't think he'll stay in school. We're looking into trade school."

Mrs. Smith, Johnny's mother stood up with her hands on her hips, her designer purse dangling from the side of her arm. A very involved parent, with connections on the school board and the president of the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA), she interrupted, "Excuse me, but I need to comment on this. I am very sorry some children have not passed the test, but I believe ALL students should be held accountable and, if a student can't even pass the FCAT, why should they be promoted? I know lots of people on the school board, and they assured me that the FCAT and NCLB are working by holding teachers and students accountable, and making sure that all students will be proficient and are not just passed on without being able to read or write. I don't think kids who can't pass the test belong in the same classroom with kids like my son who are high achievers. This is why NCLB is working. Both kinds of students are in smaller classes. They both have highly qualified teachers."

Mrs. Smith was getting angrier every second she talked. Her nostrils flared as she continued, "Further, they canceled my kids Chess Club just so the low achievers can get extra help! These kids even got Mr. Thornton. Now my son has to adjust to a new beginning teacher who hasn't even taught a day in her life! What are you complaining about?"

Ms. Peterson held her hand up, like a crossing guard. "Ladies, ladies. Please, I know everyone has their own concerns, but we need to look at how we can achieve our goal of making AYP or this school might even be closed down! Mr. Thornton, do you have something you want to share now that you will be teaching the new third grade class?"

Mr. Thornton sighed. Sarcastically, he began, "Ms. Peterson, I do have something to share and that's the concerns that we as teachers have about NCLB. Maybe I can shed some light on what Dr. Owl was really pointing out through her data, before you interrupted her. Let me quote Lange (2006) when he stated 'Gov. Bush's A+ Plan seems to be designed to ensure that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Perhaps, the plan was put together by persons who enjoy kicking those who are down or have fallen behind.' This policy is not working and, in short, neither is the way schools, districts, and states are implementing NCLB."

Other teachers were now looking at each other, hanging on the edge of their seats, eager to share their views. Mrs. Klein decided this was the right moment for her to speak up. She began, "Faculty, parents, and guests, as a third grade teacher, I am always feeling the pressure of NCLB. Researchers tell us that machines can't evaluate and attach a number to complex thought processes, so complex thought processes don't get taught.' NCLB is taking a toll on all of us."

At this point, Mr. Thornton wanted to continue where he had left off, recalling the action research paper Mrs. Klein gave him on Monday regarding teachers and NCLB. Mr. Thornton took a sip of his coffee and thanked Mrs. Klein for her input and continued. "I would like to share something I read on Monday from Joanie James, an action researcher who surveyed teachers and discovered that 'the majority of teachers agreed that punitive sanctions of NCLB had a negative effect on teachers, instruction, curriculum and student learning. Let me point out that a great many teachers are feeling huge pressure to improve the standardized test scores of students, but they are also feeling just as much pressure from the state and federal departments of education. In short, teachers are sick of teaching to a test!"

Dr. Wilson, a psychologist and a parent of a daughter in fourth grade, recognized the tension growing in the room and felt the urge to help. She raised her hand to be recognized, and Ms. Peterson quickly gave her the floor. Dr. Wilson stood and faced the EESAC committee. "Everyone, we need to meet the needs of *all* the students in the school. We are not meeting

students' needs by teaching to a test or by holding them back without considering the long-term damages caused by this practice. Not only will students drop out of high school, but the long-term effects can be even more detrimental. We have to consider the effect on them in society as well. We are setting these students up for failure in life. The answers cannot fall on one test score. There needs to be a fair and accurate evaluation of each child in order to meet his or her individual needs."

At that point, the principal, Ms. Peterson, and all the members of the EESAC, were at a loss of words. There was a chilling silence. Finally, Ms. Peterson responded quietly. "We need to evaluate all the issues and concerns, along with the negative and positive impact NCLB is having on our students at LMB. NCLB is here to stay, so as a community where do we go from here, which is the way that's clear²?"

Discussion Questions

1. What is the future for all the students who have been held back since the State of Florida mandated schools to retain children who do not pass the FCAT?
2. What effect is this policy having on children, teachers, and parents?
3. Are we meeting the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act?

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² This was a lyric taken from Def Leppard, *Rock On* from http://www.absolutelyrics.com/view/def_leppard/rock_on/