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MY YEAR AS A TEACHER Part 4

TRYING TO BRING STUDENTS TO A HIGHER STANDARD

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Education experts -- there are a lot of them -- keep bringing up the words "accountability" and "standards." These words mean various things to various people. What they mean to many classroom teachers is just a headache.

One of the worst moments of my school year came in October. We were nearing the end of third period, after I'd spent 45 futile minutes watching one-fourth of the students bounce off the desks and walls like human paddleballs.

Many had not finished their classwork, even though I felt I'd allotted ample time.

"This is it?" I asked, pointing to the thin stack of assignments that had been turned in. "What about the rest of you?"

Usually such a question met with shrugs and lowered eyes. But this time someone answered.

"No offense," Tania said, "but this class is boring."

It must have been just the bald directness of the statement that hit me, because the idea was not new. Sometimes when I'd start to discuss an aspect of language arts -- dialogue, say, or parts of speech -- I could see the disconnectedness sweep across their faces like the shadow of a huge cloud passing overhead.

They would look like they were in a dentist's chair right after the dose of nitrous oxide. Some would even have a vague smile. God knows what they're thinking of, but it certainly was not verbs.

The challenge to any teacher, especially a novice like me, is engaging the students. Before the year started, I went to a three-day seminar with several other Brownell teachers. One of the speakers was Janet Allen, a well-known education consultant.

"When the kids are saying, 'This is boring, this is stupid,' cut your losses and get out," she told us.

Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer escape routes available to teachers today. Like other public-school teachers throughout the state, we were expected at Brownell to stick to teaching the 46 state-prescribed standards in our lesson plans. (Administrators strongly suggested that we even post the standards from each day's lessons in the room.)

We also were expected to improve students' scores on district and state tests, even though the latter weren't tied to the standards. And we were expected to put students on track to pass the eighth-grade writing test and the state High School Exit Exam, which will begin to count starting with the class of 2004.

In my classroom, all of those expectations severely limited the time we could spend having fun with literature. I worried about standards first, testing second, engagement third.

We dwelled on boring things like parts of speech ("Written and Oral English Language Conventions," standard 1.3). We also spent a lot of time and effort on how to follow the directions for a writing test.

On such a test, the student's mark is tied to dutiful adherence to the directions, or "the prompt." Amazingly (to me), it doesn't really matter how well the student actually writes. What counts is how completely the student obeys the prompt.

For example, in the directions to the district writing test, students were asked to respond to a story. The prompt asked students to include a quote from the story to support their position. If a student neglected to include a quote -- no matter how well the rest of the essay was written -- he or she would automatically fail the test.

Drilling on such matters did not exactly make for a circus atmosphere in class.

Colleagues recommended alternative teaching methods to liven things up, while still trying to cover the standards. Some students respond better to physical activity, or drawing.

One exercise that worked great was "verb charades." Some students who almost never participated in class vigorously got into the game, exaggeratedly acting out words like "march" or "frighten" or "escape." Months later, long after we'd gone on to other topics, they would plead to play verb charades again.

My students also drew (and not just conclusions). When we did a book review, they drew a book cover. When we worked on persuasive presentations, they drew a poster. When we worked on verbs, they drew something in action.

Sometimes these alternative methods did engage the students. But whether that translated to actual mastery of standards was another matter.

For example, we worked on verbs for almost two weeks. I then drew up a test made up of a series of sentences, in which students were supposed to underline the verbs.

Throughout the test day, as I strolled up and down the aisles, I had at least a half-dozen students raise their hand to call me over. I would quietly approach and bend over to hear them whisper:

"Mr. Slonaker, what's a verb?"

Of course, most of my students learned what a verb was, if they didn't already know. And ultimately, most of my students improved their test scores.

But too many did not, and my psyche kept snagging on the district motto: "In Gilroy, all students will learn." Also, there was President Bush's slogan, looming over the entire country, about leaving no child behind.

Well, try as I might, I could not reach every child. I did not have the tools, or the resourcefulness, or the will, or whatever. I was definitely missing something.

That probably was the source of the dream. I had this dream even before school started, and it recurred at least once a week -- sometimes four or five times a week -- through the school year.

Summarizing, the dream went like this: All my students were in my bedroom. It was time for me to get up, but I couldn't because I didn't have any clothes on, and they would see me.

I didn't need a shrink to interpret that dream. In front of the students I felt nakedly unprepared.

That's why I took Tania's criticism to heart. Some kids thought the class was boring, and I felt unequipped to fix that. Some kids just weren't trying, and I didn't know how to make them try.

I tried rewards, like movie passes and homework passes. (Some teachers used candy, but I refused to do that.) I tried conferences with parents. I threatened students with bad grades; I pleaded with them to do their best.

But about three-quarters of the way into the year, I changed tactics. I began to concentrate more on those who did try. And I started thinking differently about those who didn't.

I told them they wouldn't always have someone performing contortions to entice them to do their work. At some point in their lives, they had to take responsibility for life's assignments, even if sometimes those assignments were boring.

With about three weeks left in the fourth quarter, we were working on book reviews ("Speaking Applications," standard 2.2). In the review, the students were supposed to summarize the plot and include a quote from the book.

I allowed them to work on it in class one day, but in third period several kids, including Tania, got little done. I asked her to get busy.

"No offense," she said, "but this is boring."

This time, instead of just taking the punch, I took her aside.

"I'm tired of hearing that from you," I said angrily.

Her eyes got large.

"Do you know what I think? I think you're just using that as an excuse, because you're too lazy to do this assignment. It doesn't matter to me if you do this assignment or not. The only person in the world it matters to is you."

The next day she turned in an "A" assignment -- a comprehensive, thoughtful book review.

Whether it was because of my little lecture or my peevishness, I don't know. Either way, her response to this admittedly simplistic approach was the exception, not the rule.

At the beginning of the school year, all the Gilroy schools' teachers gathered at the high school to hear a motivational guest speaker. One thing he said stuck in my mind:

"If a kid fails, that's his grade," he said. "But that's your grade as well."

By that measure, my year of teaching was a miserable failure. For the final semester grade in June, I issued an F to 35 students out of a total of 158.

The maddening thing to me was, every single student who put forth an effort had passed. Most of my students -- including many who received F's -- thought my class was among their easiest.

My biggest failure, I felt, was not that some students hadn't learned the material. It was that there were so many I couldn't even persuade to try.