

“A student’s failure is a reflection of the teacher.”

(Agent Jethro Gibbs, NCIS, “Crossing the Line,” S 16 - Ep 15, 2/26/19)

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I was dumbstruck, amazed at what I was seeing and incredulous. “Are you really saying that this document entitled ‘D/F Ratio’ actually reflects the number of students who have failed each specific course, by teacher, in this high school?” What was wrong with this picture? It was not unusual to find 10 – 15% (or more) of students in any one class getting failing grades. This report was handed out at a science department meeting for all to see what was happening in this large, public high school in Escondido, California. It was my last semester of clinical practice when, as a teacher candidate, I would take over the entire classroom - curriculum, testing and grading. Next year I would be teaching a regular class at some public high school, and I wondered if this D/F Ratio report was indicative of my future. Was I to expect this level of response, or lack of response from my students? Would there be that many students failing my biology classes; that many students who decided to check out or zone out and just not want to participate in class? Something had to change, even if I were the only one to do so. Things in my class had to be different.

In 2011 and 2012 I had worked for Quantum Learning Network (QLN) and been trained as a facilitator in the Quantum Learning (QL) system of teaching and learning. One area we did not touch on much in QL was testing and assessments. I recognized a big gap in my experience in this area, which was perhaps fortuitous. The situation required me to do a lot of thinking about testing methods and how effective they may or may not be. Rather than go down the path of typical testing with multiple-choice, True/False, and fill in the blank questions, I developed a

new system in which students were required to write longhand paragraphs in response to posed scenarios using the facts we had been discussing in class. My experience with this method was fruitful and I allowed those students who did not do well on their assessments, to reassess after further study. Their grade would be the best of two attempts. Sometimes the reassessment was completely different from the original, and sometimes the same.

The methodology worked amazingly well. Once realizing that there existed an assessment method in which students regularly excelled, it made me wonder why the norm for public high schools showed such a high failure rate? I remember hearing, “What can we do to reduce the D/F ratio?” I realize the answer to this question is complex. “Every year, over 1.2 million students drop out of high school in the United States alone. That’s a student every 26 seconds – or 7,000 a day,” (Excerpted from "11 Facts About High School Dropout Rates, DoSomething.org,” n.d.). “One unchanging factor when it comes to the dropout rate is socioeconomic background. . . the socioeconomic status of each pupil has impacted the graduation rate. Students from low-income families are 2.4 times more likely to drop out than middle-income kids, and over 10 times more likely than high-income peers to drop out (High School Dropout Rate: Causes and Costs, HuffPost. (n.d.). Retrieved March 18, 2019). Abelardo Villarreal, Ph.D. (1996) in his article entitled High Failure Rates: Quality or Ineffectiveness? asks the administrative questions, “When should I get concerned?” and “How does the campus define ‘failure’ as it relates to school performance? He sensed that any class that fails 10% of students should be considered for intervention, yet the group of administrators with whom he worked established 20% as the point at which they would step in to figure out what is happening. Is the failure more heavily weighted toward one ethnic race over non-minority students? (High Failure Rates: Quality or Ineffectiveness? 1996). Contemplating the point at which these

administrators would step in to intervene in the progressive down-hill failure slide in a particular class, reminded me of my own decision for intervening in a single student's life when they are not doing well. The new assessment methodology created for my classes, I knew immediately when the child begins to slide and can step in to prevent further erosion at the moment. There is no need for letting a pattern of failure metastasize to the point where the child is so overwhelmed, that they can see no way of recovering their academic life. Caught early, recovery has most often been successful, preventing the inevitable "D" or "F" on the report card.

An article by Kalman Heller, Ph.D. (2018), points to an average of 30% of public high school students failing to graduate, with urban areas running 50% to 70% failure rate. The author further analyzes solutions for these problems, and concludes the fault lies with teachers, teachers' unions, ineffective administrators and dysfunctional school boards:

What needs to be done is quite clear. Strong superintendents like Michelle Ree in Washington, D.C., Joel Klein in New York City, and Arne Duncan in Chicago, to name a few, have made significant progress with some combination of the following: take power away from the unions and ineffective school boards; require longer school days and longer school years; eliminate tenure for teachers and offer merit pay to the best teachers; fire those who can't teach effectively; certify teachers without degrees in education but who demonstrate the ability to teach effectively (which also increases the percentage of minority teachers for schools dominated by minority students); fire principals whose schools are ineffective; fund charter schools; and offer school choice. So, the path to success is known. But it is blocked by a recalcitrant bureaucracy and a stubborn teachers' union that prefers the status quo. That's why it takes exceptional leadership to effect real change (Heller, 2016).

Dr. Heller is highly opinionated about what he sees as causes of high failure rates in high school. I support all teachers in their calling as educators, whether they choose to work in the public arena or private. I have worked in both environments and have succeeded with my system of teaching and assessing in both arenas. Yet there are, nonetheless, notable differences in the atmosphere between the two environments. In a private parochial school, students are usually more motivated to do well in class than those in public institutions. Parents are paying handsomely to have their children in private schools, with public schools populated with students from a wide spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds. There are students from the migrant community who speak little English, making it hard to communicate as well as a population of main-streamed special education students.

Great teachers can be found in every school, but understanding the differences in student populations between public and private schools, I nonetheless believe the problem with the D/F Ratio report lies primarily with the teachers, and not so much with the students. Handled properly, students are like sponges when it comes to absorbing knowledge. Teach an engaging subject and you'll enjoy the natural consequences of enthusiastic and engaged students. I know this because I have taught in both public and private schools. Salaries are greater in public schools than in private, thanks to union representation, but from my personal experience, there is a difference in attitudes when comparing the two faculties, and therefore, I suggest, a different outcome in student success.

This is not to lump all teachers together based solely on their place of employment, but there are observable differences. Private school teachers have no tenure and every one is signed on with an "at-will" contract. With "at-will" contracts, the teachers are placed in the position of any regular employee of any company in which they need to perform well to keep their jobs. Private

school teachers have the motive to do their best, knowing they will get a performance review like anyone else, and continued employment will be based on how well they educate their students. There is a direct consequence of failing many students. The conclusion is that you haven't been doing your job well and the blame is laid at the teacher's feet. Barring extenuating circumstances, that teacher is then looking for another job. If we, like private school teachers, handed out as many Ds and Fs as are common in the public-school environment, we would be fired, and for good reason. One may argue that the students in public school come from the lower socioeconomic cut of the population, and my response would be, I worked in that environment, I taught and assessed in that environment, and made my system work for that group of students. If I, as a new teacher, can pull that off, then certainly veteran teachers can do the same. It is possible to meet the needs of the many students permitted in public-school classes, and still achieve a high degree of learning. My first year of teaching brought 203 students to my classroom spread through 6 periods, and still, each child received ample attention and I only had to issue one "D" the entire year. And parenthetically, I don't hand out grades like candy. The students had to earn their grades

Additionally, each public school at which I was placed for clinical practice and paid to teach, carried the stigmata of grumbling and complaints. There was the air of "us versus them;" "armed camps" in which the teachers and administrators chose opposite sides, like the Hatfields and McCoys. As a teacher candidate, then an untenured teacher, I was instructed to keep my mouth shut and not rock the boat until I was tenured. The assumption was that once tenured, they couldn't fire you easily without a major battle from the union. The tension among the faculty was palpable. Our science department meetings ended up being union meetings since the head of our department was a union representative. Rather than discuss how we could improve

our teaching for the benefit of the kids, it was a discussion about the recent contract, overloading of classes and desired increases in salary. In moving from a public school to a private school, my salary was greatly reduced. The public-school salary for a new teacher was truly impressive, but with that came also an atmosphere of strife and fear. At one point in my private school teaching career, it seemed like I might need to leave and find a public-school job just to pay our monthly bills. As it turned out, our financial situation changed and I remain today in a warm, loving, private school environment without the added stress of dealing with the unions and tenure. My experience might have been different if I had been placed in other schools and the unions had served a significant role in maintaining the dignity of employees, but the tenure subject gives teachers a false sense of security. When one knows there is virtually no way to get fired, teachers' attitudes change and their diligence easily slacks. Combined with a discouragement that comes from not having ample classroom management tools out of clinical practice, some teachers move into a minimalistic mode, doing the minimum necessary to keep their paychecks coming, like the teacher in our department that admitted, "I'm just here for the summers!"

Discouragement among teachers is a deadly disease. I can only imagine that nearly every teacher candidate leaves teacher preparation programs full of new hope for teaching and changing the world through the lives of their children. Yet, statistically, nearly 50% will quit the profession within the first five years. I guess that they became discouraged by lacking classroom management skills with which to thoroughly enjoy their students. It is for this reason, that I will hopefully someday be able to create a summer facilitator program for new teachers that focuses on just those teacher skills that make the classroom a delight.

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