MY YEAR AS A TEACHER

A System That's Fail-Safe; Passing kids despite lack of learning

Series: MY YEAR AS A TEACHER. **Chapter 7**. Promotional Policies

BY EMILY SACHAR. Newsday [Long Island, N.Y] 04 Dec 1989: 06.

This series is reporter Emily Sachar's account of her year as a teacher at IS 246, the Walt Whitman Intermediate School, based on her journal and interviews conducted after her return to New York Newsday in September. The students profiled in the series appear with the permission of their parents. Their names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of their school records

APRIL 13, 1989

THE MUSIC director raised his hand, the electric piano started, and several hundred students who had filed into the auditorium began learning the school song. It was the first rehearsal for the 1989 eighth-grade graduation from Walt Whitman Intermediate School in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

I scanned the rows of students. Scattered about were several dozen who didn't know their times tables, couldn't write a simple essay or couldn't understand a short passage in an elementary textbook. Yet, in less than two months, they would be adorned in caps and gowns and graduated to high school. I felt like I was watching a heinous lie.

And yet, I, too, was perpetuating the lie. I was going to pass students in math who hadn't come close to mastering the curriculum. "Think, before you fail a student, whether he will be well-served by another year here," the Whitman principal, Claude Winfield, told us at a faculty conference near the end of the year. "Are you doing a service to your colleagues who will have to teach that student next year? Are you doing a service to the student who will have to tell himself he's a failure?"

It didn't matter whether kids failed my math class anyway. At our school and most other intermediate schools in the city, kids who would turn 15 by summer's end would be graduated to high school, regardless of their grades or their test scores. And there were only two other criteria for promoting kids to the ninth grade: passing the standardized citywide reading test given in May, and passing three major subjects. One of the major subjects was "technology," formerly known as "shop." If a student could become proficient with ceramics, wood or plastics, and could pass two more academic subjects, he could fail language arts and math and still graduate from the eighth grade. The citywide math test didn't matter either, and on the reading test, a passing score was anything above the 21st percentile, 29 points off the national average.

The administration gave us pragmatic reasons for passing kids. If all the students who were below the eighth-grade level in academic subjects were held back, Whitman, already operating at more than 110 percent of capacity, would be even more crowded. Winfield also said there was no guarantee that a student held back would master any more the second time around. And the kids' egos had to be

considered, other administrators said.

"People have to understand that when you take a difficult child or a physically mature kid, sometimes moving him ahead has a far more beneficial effect than holding him over," one assistant principal told me after the school year ended. "You say to a teacher subtly, or you hint: If we keep these kids here, we've got another year of the kind of nonsense they pull. This is one of the reasons people retire in record numbers. They burn out."

But which kids should be passed? If I gave passing grades to students who hadn't mastered the curriculum - and I ended up doing that dozens of times - I felt I was giving them and their parents a false sense of achievement.

One of the students in my bottom class had a sister who was especially troubled by this sort of leniency. "When you pass Doreen, you make her think she knows it," Doreen's sister told me. "She goes around saying she passes in school, when we all know she can't read or do math. That's not fair to a person."

Doreen consistently scored below the 10th percentile on standardized reading and math tests. Test experts told me she would have done better by guessing. Yet, her third-quarter grades were: English, 80; social studies, 80; science, 70; foreign language, 65; math, 55. I was the only teacher who had failed her. This year, she is enrolled in a special-education school, where she is taking vocational training.

IN MY YEAR as a teacher in the New York City school system, I didn't resolve my grading dilemmas. By the middle of the year, I abandoned the curriculum and taught elementary school math in my bottom three classes. More kids ended up with passing marks on tests, but I knew those grades weren't relevant because the tests were so easy.

And my grading inconsistencies with these bottom classes were exacerbated by the kids' scores on the citywide math test in April.

In my three bottom classes, the students' scores were abysmal. Of 83 students tested, 54 did not even meet the 20th percentile in math; the 50th percentile is the national average. The scores meant that nearly two-thirds of the students in those classes were finishing the year at least one year, and in many cases two or three years, below grade level. All but four of these students were allowed to go on to the ninth grade, without having to repeat math. They would undoubtedly be worse off next year, and I knew I was part of the system that was allowing this to happen.

Yet, as the months passed, I had come to see less and less purpose in failing some children - especially students who were making an effort. As Bruce Vogeli, professor of mathematics instruction at Columbia University's Teachers College, told me when my teaching year was over: "Perhaps you have to be happy giving a child an A for the year if they mastered fifth-grade mathematics in the eighth grade. There's a difference between evaluating what the child knows and what the child has learned."

I constantly compromised and, by the end of the year, I was passing students who could not do long division, multiply decimals or add fractions - sixth-grade skills. If they had tried, even a little, I passed them. In my three bottom classes, I passed 52 of 90 students, although a vast majority had not mastered most of the material I had taught - and even that material had been far easier than the curriculum. I decided those students had tried, and I didn't want to discourage them.

If I had used the same standards by which I was graded when I was in junior high school 18 years ago, less than a quarter of my students would have passed eighth-grade math, and most of them would have been in my top class. Even though Vikki Kowalski, the assistant principal who was my immediate supervisor, encouraged me to be tough, I didn't feel that I could turn in failing grades for 110 of my 151 students.

Many of my colleagues told me they had similar feelings. "I'm not sure I can hold up my 1965 standard and wave that in front of a generation 25 years later," Ellen Yudow, a veteran English teacher, told me. " . . .When I see a growth, a spark, I want to encourage it."

I FIRST SOUGHT advice on grading in October, 1988, after a workshop for new Whitman teachers on the mechanics of recording grades. I asked one of the assistant principals what criteria I should use to pass a student. The school had distributed a 4-year-old memo suggesting that 10 percent to 15 percent of the grade be based on homework, and that 40 percent to 50 percent be based on tests and quizzes. The memo said the rest of the grade should be based on such things as class participation and projects. But I could see that if I used those standards, virtually every one of the students in my middle and three bottom classes would have failed. Through that time, many had failed tests, failed to do homework and failed to participate in class.

I gave the assistant principal the example of Artie, a student in one of my bottom classes.

"Here's a kid who doesn't know long division. He doesn't know his times tables. He is a sweet kid who tries. But his scores on the first three tests of the year averaged out to a 50. Do I pass him?"

"That's a decision you have to make," the assistant principal said.

"Well, what would you do?" I asked.

"Well, what do you get by failing him?" he said.

"Truth, that's all," I said. "He's doing failing work, so I would think I should give him a failing grade."

"It's up to you," the assistant principal said. "But maybe you pass him to encourage him."

And I did pass Artie, with a grade of 65 for the marking period, the lowest passing mark I could give. I rationalized the decision by saying I didn't want to turn him off to math when he was in the mood to give it a chance. But the grade was a lie, and I knew it.

ARTIE'S GRADE was the beginning of the end of my standards.

Around the middle of the year, I began ignoring the curriculum for my three bottom classes. Along with teaching very simple math, I began giving very simple tests and very simple homework assignments. And, as hoped, students started passing. But, then I had a new problem. Students were passing the tests, but the material was work they should have mastered years ago. I knew that if I returned to the material I was supposed to teach, most students would fail.

For instance, there was Peter, a student in one of my bottom classes. From the time I ignored the curriculum, he consistently scored highly on the tests, earning marks from 80 to 95. Peter did every homework assignment, participated in class and

often helped other students. I gave him a 90 for the final marking period.
But then came the results of the citywide math test, and Peter's score placed him in the 15th percentile nationally. Worried about the disparity between his score and the grade I'd given him, I asked Peter if he had choked on the day of the test. "No, Mrs. Emily," he said. "It was just a lot harder than your class."
Once I gave marks of 65 or higher to students in my bottom classes, I was in a bind with my top class. What was I to do with the top-class kids to whom I had also planned on giving 65s? If they had been in the bottom classes, they would have earned perfect marks because the material was so much easier.
Kevin was one of them, and he called me on the inconsistency. One afternoon, after class, I told him he'd be receiving a 65 for the first marking period. "I don't see why you can't give me a 75, Mrs. Sachar," he said. "If I was in the bottom class, I'd be getting a 100."
"You don't want to go to the bottom class, do you?" I asked. Of course he didn't, but I knew he had a point.
Ultimately, each eighth-grader competes with all 57,300 eighth-graders in the city for admission to the city's 117 high schools and placement in ninth-grade math classes. I didn't want to hurt my best students' chances of gaining admission to their dream schools. And by harboring different standards for different students, I worried I might be doing just that.
But after I left Whitman, I learned from the Board of Education that eighth-grade marks do not count in the high school selection process because applications are filed too early in the school year to include them. Only seventh-grade marks are considered.
I also didn't know if my grades were out of line with those given by other teachers at Whitman or other schools. The supervisor of Whitman's math department gave us great freedom in setting our grades.
I asked other teachers and I found a dramatic range of policies. Bob Moore, a math teacher who is the head of the teachers union chapter at Whitman, said he has a different policy for every child. "Some need a kick in the pants, so you might fail them early on," he said. "Others need understanding and encouragement, so you might pass them. Some kids I pass just because they've made a terrific effort."
Other teachers told me they don't look at the names of the students, but merely calculate the average of their test scores and record the grade. That was the approach I had planned to use, but I abandoned it by the middle of the year when I began to adjust the curriculum.
The city's standardized test results show that I couldn't have been the only one passing students who were below grade level. Although 96 percent of the city's eighth-graders were promoted last spring, more than 50 percent of them tested below grade level in reading and 60 percent tested below grade level in math on the standardized tests administered citywide. And, in the district in which I taught, District 17, nearly 60 percent of the students were below grade level in math.
But, some experts told me after the year was over that holding kids back is not the answer. "The kids come into our system with more problems, with less curiosity, lesser skills. They are constantly passed along because how can you have a 16-year-old in a sixth-grade classroom?" said Shona Sloan, administrator of the Board

of Education's office of promotional standards.
Theoretically, kids are supposed to get special help in reading and math if they test poorly. In reality, Sloan said, the city doesn't have the space or the money for all the programs that are needed. Students generally have to test way below average before they get small-group instruction.
At Whitman, my three bottom classes did get special help in math - in addition to my class, which they had for 43 minutes four times a week, they also received a class called Corrective Math three times a week. But members of my middle class did not get the special help, even though many of them also had serious deficiencies in math. One-third of the students in that class had scored at or below the 25th percentile on the previous spring's math test.
KOWALSKI, my supervisor, told me my grading dilemmas were typical. She said the school system is too large to teach kids the right way. As a result, she said, standards keep slipping. "We have to do much more individualized instruction in the junior highs, and we have to recognize that students may need to be held back for one subject but be accelerated for others."
At Whitman, students are placed into eighth-grade homeroom classes, 30 at a time, based on reading ability, and students take all of their academic classes with the kids from that homeroom. Math skills, for all intents and purposes, are irrelevant to the assignments. As a result, I had several students in my top class who were two years below grade level in math, and I had two students in my bottom class who were ready for ninth-grade algebra and geometry.
When the year started, it was easy to see that many eighth-graders were already years behind in math. The first week of class, I gave my middle class a quiz to test what they remembered from previous years. The students had to make change from a $10 bill. They had to determine which was the better buy - two apples for 30 cents or three apples for 60 cents. They had to solve two simple word problems involving division. And they had to do some basic computation with decimals. The average score on the quiz was 58. Six students passed.
In my bottom class, more than half of the students had no idea how to do long division, and 10 didn't know their times tables. One day, I asked students to explain what it means to divide 25 by 5; I put 25 buttons on a table and asked the kids to solve the problem. Only one student thought to put the buttons into five groups of five.
Many students had become accustomed, during tests, to looking up the multiplication and division facts in the back of their notebooks. They were stunned, and angry, when I refused to let them do so.
I kept wondering how the kids had gotten to eighth grade lacking so many skills. But by the end of the year, I had some of the answers. Some of the students had immigrated recently from countries where they didn't attend school regularly, or did not receive a comprehensive education. They were accepted into the eighth grade at Whitman because of their age, not their skills.
Other students had been promoted out of elementary school and into Whitman without the proper skills. The Board of Education has no requirements, merely recommendations, for promotion out of elementary school. There are special hurdles for reading at fourth and seventh grades - students must pass the

standardized reading test - but there are no hurdles for math. And elementary schools virtually never hold a student back more than once, even if he has failed to make progress, according to board officials.

Still other students began to drop academically when they arrived at Whitman, but were not held back because they met the promotional criteria used at the school. And since those criteria did not involve math scores or require passing a math class, it was easy to understand how math skills, in particular, were lacking in many of my students.

AS THE END of the year neared, I sensed a strong desire by the administration to promote as many students as possible out of the school. In March, seven seventh-grade students who were about to turn 15 were transferred into several of my classes and told to finish out the year as eighth-graders. These students had spent the first six months of the school year repeating the seventh grade, either because they had not passed enough major subjects or had failed the citywide reading test the previous spring. All of these students were old enough to be eighth-graders. Of the seven moved into my classes, only two understood the math I was teaching, as easy as it was. Several of these new eighth-graders also had missed the year's work in eighth-grade science, social studies and language arts.

The school's policies also allowed many failing eighth-graders into the ninth grade if, after a six-week summer-school course, they could pass the required three major subjects or the citywide reading test. When the school year ended last June, 28 of the school's 500 eighth-graders were slated to be held over. By this fall, that number had been whittled down to six.

Another group of students who failed to meet the criteria were required to be promoted anyway because they were considered overage: they would turn 15 by Sept. 30. Of my 151 students, 35 fit into that category. Typically, students are supposed to be 15 at the beginning of 10th grade. Most of these kids were overage because they'd already been held back once before.

One assistant principal suggested that the lax promotional policies cause some unintended problems. "If a kid who's a goof-off has a brother or sister who sees that you still get promoted regardless of what grades you get or what test scores you have, then what incentive is there for him to study when his time comes?" he said at the end of the year.

The administration made a distinction between students who were being promoted because they had met the standards and those who were being moved on to the ninth grade in spite of their failures. But that distinction was only symbolic: Those who had failed to meet the standards were not allowed to attend the eighth-grade graduation ceremonies at Brooklyn College.

But, because the standards are so weak and so limited, many students who've met them leave junior high unable to run a cash register or read a simple job-training manual. Yet, pitifully, they think they know quite a bit.

On the day of the Whitman graduation in June, I helped students clip on their mortarboards and put on their makeup. But I couldn't help wondering how many would make it to the next graduation - the one that really counts.