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Accountability **lights** a fuse

It finally happened. I suffered my first legitimate ‘accountability breakdown’ the other day after our school’s academically gifted teacher stopped by my room. “I need you to sign a few papers, Bill,” she said, “verifying that you are going to provide a differentiated curriculum for your AG students.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised. After all, I’ve been signing similar papers for 15 years. Essentially, each document details the level of service that my kids are entitled to receive. They’re designed simply as a reminder of the importance of meeting the needs of the gifted students in my classes.

Instead, they simply set me off!

“I’m sick of being held accountable,” I snapped. “Do you have to sign any forms documenting your work? Better yet, do teachers beyond reading and math have to sign these papers? What guarantees are we getting on the results of everyone else working in this building?”

No joke — I was borderline hateful and definitely mean.

As our AG teacher beat a hasty retreat, I was left to vent to anyone who would listen. My frustration was only fueled by a comment made earlier in the year by a district data guru suggesting that the teachers of my team were “decidedly average” and “somewhat complacent” when it came to reading instruction. His evidence: Our school’s standardized test scores.

“That’s it!” I shouted, “I want any one of the dozens of untested positions in our school. Wouldn’t it be nice to have no accountability for once?!”

Picking up the pieces after my outburst has made me realize that our nation’s efforts to “hold teachers accountable” have changed who I am as an educator. Once a passionate artist driven by human relationships and by creative exploration with my kids, I am now nothing more than a technician studying the numbers and trying to produce results on end-of-grade exams.

Constant pressure and criticism — a tool that society has seemed to embrace to drive change in education — has left me wondering whether I even want to work in a classroom any longer. At every turn, fingers seem to point at me because I teach a tested subject. Each year, I pensively await the results of exams knowing that drops in “the numbers” will land me in hot water — no matter how hard I worked the year before.

Some days, I’m even left to wonder whether what I do each day can really be called “teaching.” It certainly doesn’t resemble the work that I embraced early in my career.

Is my reaction to our nation’s emphasis on results somehow irrational or perfectly understandable? Have ‘accountability breakdowns’ become more common in your school? How can school leaders support teachers who rest under the never-ending glare of end of grade exams?

Are ‘accountability breakdowns’ another unintended consequence of No Child Left Behind? If so, are they a consequence that we’re comfortable with? How can we hold teachers accountable for performance without destroying who they are as people? ♦



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