



Bill Ferriter is a 6th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.

No better than a fortune teller?

One summer, my buddy Mike and I took a day off from the camp where we were working and traveled around Maine taking pictures of an unopened bottle of Rolling Rock in interesting locations. I'm not sure why, but we thought it was hilarious! Early in our adventure, we drove past a house with a sign reading, "Have your fortune told. REAL crystal ball!"

Figuring that we had to have a picture with a "real crystal ball," we pulled over. We paid \$15 and then sat down at a card table with a haggard old woman and the cheap glass paperweight she swore was an enchanted object passed down through her family for generations.



Doubting the supernatural but enjoying the experience, we settled in for a completely bizarre conversation. "I see many things here," she started. "You are both going to make many people laugh and many people cry. You will love and be loved. Troubles will come, but you will remain undaunted."

We weren't impressed with these ambiguous predictions, and so we pushed for more. "There's got to be something better than that in a real crystal ball!" we argued.

"Yes," she whispered, "It is coming to me. I see that you are both going to make money and spend money!" That was it. Mike and I broke into hysterics, forcing our fortune teller to kick us out.

Sadly, I'm wondering whether schools are any better at giving feedback to clients than my fortune-telling friend. Think about it: Can parents really learn anything more about the strengths

and weaknesses of their children from the grades that come home on report cards than I learned sitting around a glass paperweight with a cheesy mystic?

Chances are the answer is no. In most schools, educators work independently of one another to determine students' levels of mastery — causing standards of performance to vary from one room to another, dependent on nothing more than the opinion of individual practitioners.

What's worse, teachers rarely have time to provide meaningful feedback to students. Buried under planning, paperwork and parents, the only time that we control in our day is the amount of time that we spend grading assignments. As a result, students get tasks back covered in generic comments like,

"Nicely Done" and "Needs Improvement."

Not as hysterical, is it?

So what's the solution?

First, teams of teachers need to collectively create exemplars demonstrating levels of excellence that parents and students can use to better understand what competence and content mastery look like. Even better, exemplars ensure evaluative consistency across entire hallways — something that is often nonexistent in schools.

Second, school leaders need to limit the external demands placed on teachers. No longer is it OK for schools to push meaningless tasks onto classroom teachers. Ensuring that planning and grading are the No. 1 priority of the professionals working with students in your building may just guarantee that feedback can be something more than ineffective fortune telling.

Don't we owe that to parents and students? ♦

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