

# *Leaving the Minorities Behind<sup>1</sup>*

## **One Monday Morning at LMB Elementary School**

Mr. Thornton was a dedicated teacher at LMB for the past eighteen years. He had always taught fifth grade, and was in the habit of arriving early in the morning and staying late to teach his chess club. He implemented the club at LMB to help raise fifth grade students' math scores.

Mr. Thornton (as usual) arrived early with his Mickey D's breakfast and what appeared to be at least a gallon size mug of coffee. He was eager to start his day with his usual ritual of gulping down breakfast while setting up for his fifth grade class. Just as he took a sip of his coffee an announcement came on the loud speaker.

"Mr. Thornton, please report to the principal's office."

Mr. Thornton hesitantly got up "CHOKe CHOKe!" Mr. Thornton proceeded towards the office wondering, *what does the old bag want NOW? Which one of my kids screwed up this time?*"

Repeat, "Mr. Thornton please report to the office ASAP!"

Mr. Thornton continued down the hall towards the office at a very nonchalant pace. He was thinking there better be a good reason he's being summoned to the office. His coffee and breakfast were getting cold and he needed time to set up his classroom.

(Mr. Thornton entered Ms. Peterson's office.) Ms. Peterson was a veteran administrator that just recently accepted the position as principal of LMB. The county demoted the previous administrator due to the fact that LMB was not able to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for the past three years. Before working for LMB, Ms. Peterson was the administrator of a prestigious private school in a near by county. That school was not held accountable to the nation's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) due to their privatization.

"Good morning Mr. Thornton."

"Yeah, Yeah Ms. Peterson which one of my fifth graders messed up now? Couldn't this wait? I need time to set my classroom up and it's not even time to report to school yet. I sure hope you called me ALL THE WAY down here for a purpose."

"I'm sorry for interrupting your breakfast Mr. Thornton, but this is about you and not your students."

"Oh come on I didn't do anything wrong. Don't you like the Chess Club? It's going great!"

"No it's not that Mr. Thornton. I have to inform you that due to the NCLB and the class size reduction act, we have created a new class that we'd like you to teach. These are students who have failed the third grade Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). This class will only have 18 students. However, some of these students have failed third grade more than once."

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<sup>1</sup> Patti Ward, A Teachers Network Leadership Institute Met-Life Fellow, wrote this case. Materials for the case were taken from a study "Teacher Policy Institute Project, written by Joannie James, Met- Life Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, 2006.

“OH NO! Please Ms. Peterson NOT THIRD GRADE! That’s the high stake grade! I’ll have to spend ALL my time teaching for the TEST. What will happen to my fifth grade class?”

“Don’t worry about your fifth grade class I’ll be placing a new teacher in there. I’m sorry Mr. Thornton this will be effective starting tomorrow. Oh and about that chess club? There’s no more funding for your chess club, since we have to put any extra funds towards Reading. Special Clubs just aren’t going to help us make AYP and besides you’ll be with third graders now.”

Mr. Thornton uttered in a sardonic tone “THANKS A LOT Ms. Peterson. You’ve ruined my breakfast and worse probably my entire school year! Am I dismissed?”

“Yes, Mr. Thornton. Remember this wasn’t personal. We think you are a great teacher and we need a strong teacher to motivate these students because they’ve been held back and all their peers are in fourth or even fifth grade. I’m sure you’ll work well with them. Thank you”

### ***Back in Class Rm. P3 Section 503***

Later that same day Mr. Thornton was in his fifth grade class when Johnny came in. Johnny was a fifth grade student that was top in his class and the school’s champion chess player.

“Hey Mr. T, I heard you got demoted! You’ll be teaching third grade with all those NCLB kids. Jose Martinez is in that class.”

“What do you mean Johnny? He should be at JFK Middle by now!”

“Nope Mr. T, he’s still in third grade and I heard you’ll be his teacher along with all those other NCLB kids.”

“Johnny what do you know about the NCLB?”

“Oh that’s easy MR. T. I know that EVERY child’s BE-HIND is left in third grade until they pass that FCAT test! And those kids couldn’t pass so their butts are in third grade ‘till they do. HAHA, you’ll be those stupid kids’ teacher. Ain’t that right MR. T?”

It hurt Mr. T to hear Johnny speak like that. Johnny was a bright boy and one of his chess club champs. He realized how tough it must be for all those third graders when everyone, even their peers, knew they couldn’t pass the ONE standardized test that the government thinks makes them a fourth grader. How could he break the news to the fifth grade students that loved him? How will he tell all of the chess club kids that there would be no more chess club? He knew he was in for a bad day and even worse, a messed up year!

At the end of the school day, Mr. Thornton leaned back, looked at the pile of papers that needed to be graded and happened to glance over to a paper his colleague, long time friend, and third grade team leader Mrs. Klein had placed in his mail box. She had heard Mr. Thornton was moved to her grade level team and thought he might be interested in the research. Mr. Thornton picked up the action research report written by James (2006) and began to read “since the January 2002 federal implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, our nation has made a huge investment in an effort to achieve what seems to be a worthy goal. That goal is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards as measured by state standardized tests. It is contended that this will result in the closing of the achievement gap between high and low-performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students, and between economically disadvantaged children and their more economically advantaged peers”. Mr. Thornton put down the paper, sighed and reflected on LMB.

### ***The students of L.M.B Elementary School***

Mr. Thornton realized that the majority of students at LMB received free breakfast and free and reduced lunch. LMB was a large urban school located in the largest county in the state of Florida. There were approximately 1010 students of which 1% was white Non-Hispanic, 86% were Black Non-Hispanic, 11% were Hispanic, and 2% were Asian/Indian Multiracial. The school had never made AYP as mandated through the NCLB. In order to pass third grade the students were required to take a Standardized Test called the FCAT. This test was mandated by the state in order to comply with NCLB insuring that every student be proficient in Reading. The majority of students that did not pass the FCAT that year were either black, Hispanic, and/or low socioeconomic status.

Mr. Thornton put down his papers, grabbed his coffee mug, turned the lights out and headed towards the door. Right as he locked the door another announcement came over the loud speaker. *“Oh, Crap! Please don’t call me to the office again.”*

He heard Ms. Peterson saying, “All staff members there will be an important ESSAC meeting on Friday. Please make arrangements to attend an email will be sent out with all the details. Thank you staff and hope everyone has a great week.

Mr. Thornton’s last thought as he jumped into his jeep was *“have a great week—how the heck can I have a great week, or even a great school year at this rate!”*

### ***The ESSAC Committee<sup>2</sup>***

LMB like any other school in this district was required to have its own Educational Excellence School Advisory Council (ESSAC) that held regularly scheduled meetings. The council’s job was to make final decisions about the school’s School Performance Excellence Plan. The plan details how the school will improve in such areas as student performance, equipment upgrading and FCAT preparation. The council welcomed and encouraged parent participation. The ESSAC was composed of the principal, teachers, education support employees, students, parents, and business/community representatives.

### ***A Call for an Emergency ESSAC Meeting***

An emergency ESSAC meeting was called by Ms. Peterson on Friday at 5:00 PM. After the move of Mr. Thornton from fifth grade to third there was a group of outraged parents and students that protested the move, and others that were angry because their child was placed in the “Third Grade Retainee” class. Ms. Peterson knew she would be dealing with a lot of angry, up tight people, so she even asked security to stay late that night. Even the teachers would be angry for having to attend another meeting after hours and she wouldn’t be able to pay them for the extra hours with all the budget cuts. Taking a deep breath, Ms. Peterson headed the meeting.

“Let me start this meeting with an update on the NCLB and the support we were given from our district since the act has been in effect. LMB has more ‘Highly Qualified Teachers’ than we have had in the past. Both parents and legislators have a clear view of our performance. Our

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<sup>2</sup> The information about the ESSAC Committee was taken from website:  
[http://www.dadeschools.net/newsletter/may\\_2004/school\\_lingo\\_may.doc](http://www.dadeschools.net/newsletter/may_2004/school_lingo_may.doc)

school is being held accountable to higher standards and we must communicate our results to the parents and the community. Due to the fact that we have not yet met AYP according to NCLB, we are now facing some rather harsh consequences. At this time I would like our community representatives to share their concerns and maybe together we can make a difference. I recognize Ms. Martinez a parent from Mr. Thornton's new third grade class."

Ms. Martinez was a Hispanic parent with a son named Jose who was held back in third grade twice due to failing the FCAT. Her son had a learning disability with an IQ score of 80 that was caused by the umbilical cord that was wrapped around Jose's neck at birth. This caused a lapse in oxygen that went to the brain. She was actively involved in her son's program the Exceptional Student Education (ESE) class.

Ms. Martinez stood up to address the committee.

"Ms. Peterson please excuse me but I don't give a rat's butt forgive my French about some government policy and the fact that we have some legislators watching us. I am one pissed off MOM because my child is being moved to Mr. Thornton's third grade class!"

Ms. Peterson replied.

"Now, Ms. Martinez we have to recognize the fact that if it wasn't for the legislation, our students would be sitting in overcrowded classrooms. Instead there are only 18 students in your son's class along with a very highly qualified teacher, Mr. Thornton. You are also getting free tutoring for your child through private sources funded by the government because we did not meet AYP."

Ms. Martinez continued by responding politely to Ms. Peterson.

"I know Ms. Peterson, Mr. Thornton is a great teacher and I am getting Jose tutored but as a parent I've got lots of issues and concerns about my son and the other kids that failed the FCAT! How well will our children adjust to third grade when their peers are in fourth and even some in fifth grade? What will happen to them if they don't pass the test again? Can they or will they be left behind again? What will the school do with all these retained students? Will they be placed in classes with other retained students or will they be placed in a class with non-retained third graders? Don't you think their odds of dropping out are greater because their attitude will suck once they reach their teens and are only in sixth grade? And these are just a FEW of my concerns!"

Feeling the frustration and tension rising, Ms. Peterson responded quickly.

"Ms. Martinez I recognize that the parents have a lot of questions and concerns. Some I can answer and some I cannot. Others I hope some teachers might be able to shed some light on. At LMB we decided to keep the students that failed the FCAT together because we had the concern that if we placed these students with third graders that have not been held back we would have the problem of changing the curriculum for these retained students and at the same time being able to teach the other students with the required curriculum. We're not sure as to how any of these students will adjust. We're attempting to meet the requirements that the state mandates when a student in third grade did not pass the FCAT."

Dr. Owl, a veteran third grade teacher that majored in research and statistical data during her doctoral studies interrupted Ms. Martinez. She felt frustrated and concerned for all the children that kept getting retained in third grade

“Ms. Peterson, Ms. Peterson, I’ve done all the research and have some statistics that might help. According to Peter Whoriskey of the Washington Post ‘in Florida, as many as 14 percent of 200,000 public school third-graders in some years have been held back, most for failing to make an adequate score on the reading test.’ In Lange’s research ‘students who were two or more years older than their grade peers seldom stay in school beyond grade nine or grade ten. Not counting students with disabilities, during 2003-2004 the numbers of Florida students 2 or more years older than grade peers were: 17,332 for grade 8; 41,048 for grade 9; 23,693 for grade 10; 13,478 for grade 11; and 2,539 for grade 12. The number of lost students during high school was similar for the next year. In the 2004-2005 school year the numbers of students two or more years older than grade peers were: 16,848 for grade 8; 32,745 for grade 9; 21,728 for grade 10, 14,310 for grade 11, and 2,239 for grade 12.’ In other words failing students based on one test is having a negative affect on our students.”

She was ready to go on with more numbers but Ms. Peterson stopped her before she went on and bored everyone to death with her statistics. Ms. Peterson thanked Dr. Owl for all that data and recognized Mrs. Pierre a parent that had four children that had attended LMB and was looking anxious to say something. Mrs. Pierre had a child in ninth grade and he had been held back twice, once in third grade and once in eighth grade. He could not pass the FCAT both times. The youngest was just starting third grade and she was very concerned he would not pass the FCAT, too. She wanted to let the parents know the consequences when a student repeatedly fails the FCAT. Mrs. Pierre addressed Ms. Martinez’s concerns.

“Ms. Martinez, concerning students that don’t pass the FCAT a second time, according to policy they could possibly be left behind again and when they get to eighth grade if they don’t pass that test they can be held back again. These students could possibly be 15 or **even older** and still be in middle school. My oldest son Dan was held back twice and he doesn’t think he’ll stay in school. We’re looking into trade school”

Mrs. Smith was Johnny’s mother. She was a very involved parent with connections on the county’s Public School Board and the president of the school’s Parent Teacher Association (PTA) stood up with her hands on her hips, her designer purse dangling from the side of her arm and interrupted.

“Mrs. Pierre excuse me but I need to address Ms. Martinez’s concerns, too. Ms. Martinez I am VERY sorry your son has not passed the test but I believe ALL students should be held accountable and if a student can’t even pass the FCAT why should they be promoted? I know lots of people on the school board and they assured me that the FCAT and NCLB is working by holding teachers and students accountable, and making sure that all students will be proficient and are not just passed on with out being able to read or write. I don’t think your son belongs in the same classroom with kids like my son who are high achievers. This is why NCLB is working. Both our sons are in smaller classes. They both have highly qualified teachers and your son can even get FREE tutoring.”

Mrs. Smith was getting angrier every second she talked. Her nostrils flared she continued.

“What the hell, they canceled my kids chess club just so your José can get extra help! You even got his teacher Mr. Thornton. Now Johnny has to adjust to a new beginning teacher that hasn’t even taught a day in her life! What ARE YOU complaining about?”

Ms. Peterson quickly interrupted Mrs. Smith

“Ladies, ladies. Please, I know every one has their own concerns but we need to look at how we can achieve our goal of making AYP or this school might even be closed down! Mr. Thornton, do you have something you want to share now that you will be teaching the new third grade class?”

Mr. Thornton paused; sighed and thought *that old hag is brining me into her pile of dog crap and wants ME to help her out! Like H-E -double hockey sticks!* He slammed down his coffee mug.

Sarcastically, Mr. Thornton began, “Ms. Peterson I do have something to share and that’s the concerns we as teachers have about NCLB. Maybe I can shed some light on what Dr. Owl’s data was really pointing out, before you interrupted her. Let me quote Lange (2006) when he stated ‘Gov. Bush’s A+ plan seems to be designed to ensure that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Perhaps, the plan was put together by persons who enjoy kicking those who are down or have fallen behind.’ This policy is not working and in short neither is the way schools; districts and states are implementing NCLB.”

Other teachers were now looking at each other, hanging at the edge of their seats eager to share what they felt. Mrs. Klein decided this was the right time for her to speak up.

“Faculty, parents and guest as a third grade teacher I am always feeling the pressure of NCLB. As Brady (2006) stated about ‘why No Child Left Behind is dumbing down America's kids: 1. Teachers always teach to the test. 2. Under NCLB, the only tests that count are standardized and machine scored rather than teacher created and scored. 3. Machines can't evaluate and attach a number to complex thought processes, so complex thought processes don't get taught.’ NCLB is taking its toll on all of us.”

At this point Mr. Thornton wanted to continue where he had left off recalling the action research Mrs. Klein left him on Monday regarding teachers and NCLB. Mr. Thornton took a sip of his coffee and thanked Mrs. Klein for her input and continued.

“I would like to share something I read on Monday about Joannie James an action researcher that surveyed teachers and discovered that ‘the majority of teachers agreed that punitive sanctions of NCLB had a negative effect on teachers, instruction, curriculum and student learning.’ Let me point out that a great many of the teachers are all feeling huge pressure to improve the standardized test scores of the students but they are also feeling just as much pressure form the state and federal Department of Education. In short teachers are sick of teaching to a TEST!”

Dr. Wilson was a psychologist and a parent of a daughter in fourth grade. She recognized the tension growing in the room and felt the urge to help. She raised her hand to be recognized and Ms. Peterson quickly gave her the floor. Dr. Wilson stood and faced the EESAC committee.

“Everyone, we need to meet the needs of all the students in the school. We are not meeting students’ needs by teaching to a TEST or by holding them back without considering the long-term damages caused by this practice. Not only will students drop out of high school but the long term affects can be even more detrimental than we are considering when retaining all these minorities and underprivileged students. We have to consider the affects on them in society as well. We are setting these students up for failure in life. The answers cannot fall on one test score.

There needs to be a fair and accurate evaluation of each child in order to meet his or her individual needs.”

At that point, the principal Ms. Peterson and all the members of the EESAC were at a loss of words. There was a chilling silence. Finally Ms. Peterson responded quietly.

“We need to evaluate all the issues and concerns along with the negative and positive impact NCLB is having on the major shareholders (our students of LMB). NCLB is here to stay, so as a community where do we go from here, which is the way that’s clear<sup>3</sup>?”

### ***Questions and Considerations***

1. What is the future for all the students who have been held back since the state of Florida had mandated schools retain children that do not pass the FCAT?
2. What effect is this policy having on the children, teachers, and parents?
3. Are we meeting the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act?

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<sup>3</sup> This was a lyric taken from Def Leppard, **Rock On** from website [http://www.absolutelyrics.com/view/def\\_leppard/rock\\_on/](http://www.absolutelyrics.com/view/def_leppard/rock_on/)