
Test Exclusions Develop Into “Test Scandal”

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**Journal of Cases in
Educational Leadership**
Volume 8 Number 2
June 2005 8-16
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Educational Administration
<http://jcel.sagepub.com>
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Many states use test results to hold schools accountable, with the stakes for children, teachers, and administrators becoming higher. High school principal Kimberly Reeves had to show substantial progress in raising achievement scores to keep her school off the state’s low-performing list and to help the district maintain positive community relations. Reeves declined to test several high school students who were failing core courses and would be required to retake them the following year. The principal had not considered this a form of cheating, even though it ran counter to the spirit of the state testing guidelines. Her decision could have unintended consequences for the district and the local economy.

Keywords: *instructional leadership; school and community relations; high-stakes testing*

The Community

Lincoln, a small town of 25,000 located in an agrarian region of the Midwest, has experienced a rollercoaster of economic ups and downs in the past 30 years. The community maintained a good relationship with its Air Force Base, which added hundreds of students to the district’s average daily attendance and around \$3 million in impact aid monies to school budgets. The rapport between the military and civilian populations dated back to 1974, when the base reopened after being closed for several years. However, 5 years ago, the ArgiChem Corporation moved its headquarters from Lincoln to Chicago to centralize operations. The loss of 150 senior executives and their families remained a serious blow to the economy, as many of the community’s leading citizens relocated.

In light of the AgriChem loss, city leaders realized that a base closure would be catastrophic to the local economy. They worked very hard to preserve harmony in anticipation of the U.S. Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) reviews scheduled for the following spring. The Air Force requested that a "green belt" be established around the base and its runways. Base leaders decided that an area needed to be free of housing to protect civilians from the noisy flight paths of airplanes taking off and landing at all hours. They made a second request that the crops planted in and around the green belt be limited to those that would not draw certain birds. Apparently, some birds were easily sucked into the planes' engines, causing major damage. Because the government bought the few remaining dwellings that were within the belt, the housing request did not cause a problem. However, several farmers still owned land that bordered the green belt. They believed it to be an encroachment on their rights to be told what crops they would be allowed to plant; moreover, the farmers' livelihoods would not be directly affected by a base closure.

The city leaders pushed for the green belt area to be approved, fearing the devastating economic consequences of a base closure from the BRAC review. The state senator, state representative, and school board members knew the impact a base closure would have on the city and its schools, and they all supported the approval of the green belt area. The farmers pressed to keep the land free of zoning restrictions. One influential farmer who continued to be vocal was Bob Reeves, the high school principal's husband. The zoning request was finally granted by the property owners and supported by all groups except the county wheat and grain farmers.

Because Lincoln was such a small town, the social events revolved around school activities. The school was the one entity that drew this diverse community together. Football games, fundraisers, open houses, and choir concerts provided the social events for many families, both privileged and underprivileged.

The School Board

The five-member school board planned to build a new elementary school in the community and to add classroom space to two secondary schools. The board had approved plans drawn by the architect, the paperwork had been submitted to the county excise board, and the bond issue had been placed on the ballot for the very next month.

The board of education was made up of three men and two women: Randy Grimes, board president, co-op tire dealer; Scott Benson, vice president, radio announcer; Nancy Whitehead, veterinarian; Gwendolyn Nance, attorney; and Rick Faulkner, bank loan officer, farm and ranch landowner. Grimes and Faulkner were both good friends with Bob Reeves, the landowner who had led the fight against the zoning restrictions. Although they could not formally support the farmers because of the BRAC review, they sympathized with them.

Board Member Nance was the first person to catch a hint of test rumors from her church group on Sunday morning. She approached a high school counselor that attended her Bible class and asked her about the rumors. The counselor confided that there were eligible high school students exempted from the state achievement testing. Having made it a habit to keep up with school law, Nance became concerned immediately about the potential for a scandal and called the superintendent that night, asking him to investigate.

The Superintendent

The superintendent, Dr. Mark Sharp, spent most of his time with public relations tasks because the upcoming bond issue and the BRAC review were major undertakings for him. Therefore, he left day-to-day decisions in the district to principals and central office administration.

What worried Sharp most was the public's negative concern about the high school's test scores. Throughout the years, those scores had dropped and the school had narrowly missed being placed on the state's low-performing list several times. Two years ago, Sharp hired the best math teacher in the district as principal of the high school, telling her, "I don't care how you do it, but I want the high school scores up—well above average—because I have a bond issue to pass." In addition, the principal's husband was the leader of the farming and ranching group that traditionally argued against any increase in property taxes. Sharp hoped that in addition to hiring a good principal, he would establish good relations with the farming group who could make or break his effort for a bond issue and a positive BRAC review.

When Nance called him, Sharp vehemently denied that Reeves would compromise her position with test irregularities. He believed that the principal, who was the test coordinator for her building, knew the state mandates that all eligible students must be tested except for those who are specifically exempted by law. Sharp told Nance that students who had been excused must have been exempt. Whether the rumors were true or not, with the bond issue

and BRAC looming, both Nance and Sharp were very concerned about a test scandal in their community.

The Principal

The high school principal, Kimberly Reeves, was well liked by teachers who respected her hard work and dedication to academic principles. Well known in the community, Reeves had attended the local schools and had returned after college to teach, marrying her childhood sweetheart. She was active in many community events, especially those that included the military affairs, because her father had been assigned to and retired as an officer from the local Air Force Base.

A favorite math teacher with the students, Reeves had been hired as principal expressly to raise the high school test scores. Although ACT results had remained above average the past few years, only college-bound students typically took the test. Standardized achievement tests mandated by the state show the high school normally lagged several percentage points below the state average in both English and math.

When Sharp hired Reeves, he gave her the freedom to put in her own programs to raise the scores and promised full support of her efforts. Sharp told her the district planned to float a bond issue in the next 3 years and that the base was facing a BRAC review soon. He told her that passing the bond and avoiding base closure were predicated on positive community relations. The public would only support the district if they felt the schools were doing a better than average job in educating children.

The Problem

The first year Reeves was hired, she added a test-taking study skills class to the high school curriculum and rotated all students through the 9-week study. Students learned how test questions were written with distracters and wrong answers. Then, students took practice tests with questions formatted the same way a test company would write them. Reeves would monitor the class frequently, helping tutor students on math sections.

Test scores at the end of the first year had risen slightly. At the end of the second year, scores dropped lower than ever, and the school was placed on first-year probation status by the state. If scores remained low, the school would be labeled as low performing. Frequently, Reeves monitored instruc-

tion throughout the building. She observed that teachers had implemented state standards but were not directly preparing students for the achievement tests. After encouragement from Dr. Sharp and Board President Grimes, Reeves called her faculty together, impressing on them the need to “teach to the test” by explicitly connecting teaching activities to the state standards and reminding them of the high stakes.

Obtaining released copies of state tests, Reeves administered them with the help of her two counselors, and together, they spent hours hand scoring them. As far as Reeves could tell, the scores on the state-mandated tests were not going to be much better the third year. Another district in the state was accused of having teachers coach students toward right answers and even changing answers after the fact. Regardless of the pressure, she refused to even consider this sort of out-and-out cheating. However, when she analyzed state law, the statute actually mandated the following: “Tests shall be administered to every student who has completed instruction for the specified courses, unless otherwise exempt by law.” No stipulation had been made about failing or passing instruction, only completing it.

At the last minute, Reeves had decided not to administer the state test to several students who were failing math and English and would be required to repeat classes the following year. Even though she knew the intent of the law was to test all students to evaluate the year’s instruction, Reeves considered those students who were failing a class as not having completed the instruction. Rationalizing this as a learning opportunity, Reeves gave this group a released test, keeping those scores from getting mixed in with the state-mandated tests. Reeves hoped that excluding those low-scoring students from the group would significantly raise overall test results. She had not considered this exclusion a form of cheating but rather a means of playing the game of high-stakes accountability that the state had imposed on them.

The Phone Call

Reeves sat at her desk going over Monday morning’s mail when Dr. Sharp called.

“Kim, I’m glad you’re in,” Sharp said. “I have a board member who has questions about last week’s testing. One of your counselors shared something with her at church about anticipating better test scores this year. Something was said about exempting low-scoring students from the test.”

The comment caught Reeves completely by surprise, and butterflies immediately took flight in her stomach. She implicitly trusted both her counselors, and they were not ones to make off-hand remarks or break confidentiality.

“Well,” Reeves answered, “We did excuse some. ESL students are exempt the first year and some IEP students have alternate assessments. The rest are those who are miserably failing both math and English.” She hesitated, but decided to share with him the premise she had used to exempt the low-performing students. “Students who failed have not completed their instruction and will have to repeat courses they failed, so we did not include them. We will test them next year after they successfully complete and pass their classes.”

“Are we following state law, Kim?” Sharp asked.

“Oh, I’m sure we are. I haven’t seen anything in writing that says we can’t do that. You wanted our test scores to show substantial progress, and we’ve worked very hard to make that happen,” she answered. “I think you will be pleased with our results this year.”

There was a long pause before Sharp said anything. “Kim, can you assure me we’re following legal procedure? Ms. Nance is really concerned about rumors getting started. So am I. We can’t have a test scandal with next month’s bond issue and a BRAC review coming up next year.”

“What do you suggest, Dr. Sharp?” Reeves asked.

“I want us to meet with Ms. Nance this afternoon and decide what course of action we should take to counter the rumors. Can you be in my office at one?” he asked.

“Sure, I’ll be there.” Reeves hung up the phone, quickly picking up the receiver to dial the counselor’s office.

The Challenge

Put yourself in Ms. Reeves’s place. How would you counter the rumors and resolve this possible test scandal?

Teaching Notes

This case study can be used in a variety of educational leadership courses, including community relations, ethics, policy, politics, and leadership. Using small group formats in a student-centered approach, each group can deliber-

ate the ethical issues, the principal's dilemma, the superintendent's leadership, the board of education's role, or the community issues.

Key Issues and Questions

Ethical Issues

1. What are the moral and ethical questions that could be raised about the test exclusions?
2. Given the state mandate cited, create arguments for and against the exclusion of low-scoring children from testing, those who will have to repeat the classes and take the exams again. Explain your response.
3. If the state's intent is that every child who completes instruction (failing or passing) should take the end-of-instruction exam, what should Reeves have done? What arguments could she use to justify her decision to exclude some students? If state law does not specifically address the exclusion of failing students from the achievement tests, what recourse would the state have?

Principal's Issues

1. What alternatives does the principal have in resolving this possible test scandal before it gets out of hand? Identify the pros and cons of each option.
2. Given the fact that Board Member Nance is an attorney and knows school law very well, what should Reeves do before her meeting at 1 p.m.? For what reasons should Reeves retain (or not retain) an attorney of her own at this point? Should she try to postpone the meeting or not, and what arguments could she use if she delayed the confrontation?
3. What discussions should Reeves have had with the counselors before she made the decision to exclude low-scoring students? What should Reeves say (and not say) to her counselors at this point? What should she do to address the rumors from the one counselor? The lack of discretion with the board member? Possible future violations of confidentiality?

Superintendent's Issues

1. Which of the superintendent's actions were appropriate (and not appropriate) in the instructional issues at the high school? What are the pros and cons of his style of leadership, leaving the day-to-day decisions of operating the school to the principals and central office?
2. How should Dr. Sharp approach this possible scandal with Ms. Reeves? What role should Ms. Nance play in the decisions that are made? What are Sharp's options at this point?
3. If the rumors of a test scandal hit the newspaper and other media, what do you anticipate the community's response will be to the bond issue and the BRAC review? How could Sharp counteract adverse publicity?

Board of Education Issues

1. What role does the school board have in this situation? What would be appropriate action for a board member on hearing rumors? What will likely happen if other board members hear the rumors or are called? What are the board's options?
2. What do you anticipate will be the actions of the board of education toward the superintendent? The high school principal? The test scandal? How and why would their votes be split on the issues?

Community Issues

1. If Kim Reeves is reprimanded or even fired for her actions, what repercussions will that have on the community? The school board? The bond issue? The BRAC review? What weight would you give to the agrarian group being a key factor in the bond election and the BRAC review? What might happen with this group of farmers if Kim Reeves is fired?
2. What considerations must be made because of the military-civilian relationship in this school district? What consequences could this situation have on the BRAC review and the local economy? What are the options for the city leaders? Explain your response.

Suggested Readings

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