

Texas Teacher Fired for Maintaining Grading Standards

by Matthew K. Tabor on April 24, 2007

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The blogosphere is a funny place. I check my [Google Analytics](#) account every few days to see how people get to this site, including the terms they use in search engines to find the articles. If there's a search term that surprises me, I search it myself to see how this site came up and who else is around it. That's how I came across [E.C. Huey, a candidate for the Guilford, North Carolina school board](#), who weighed in on a recent injustice in public education.

Mr. Huey pointed me to a story in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram that [exposed the firing of a 6th grade teacher](#) for refusing to give students grades that they didn't deserve:

Problems for sixth-grade math teacher Michelle Kevil began last fall when parents complained to school authorities at [Bear Creek Intermediate School](#) in the Keller district.

One set of parents wrote Principal Tedna Taylor asking that their child be transferred from Kevil's class. The parents hired a math tutor, they wrote, who couldn't understand the child's poor math grades.

I've heard this record spun on the Victrola more than a few times, but it never quite seems to wear out. Parents, unhappy with their child's performance in a class - usually because the student just isn't making the grade - go outside the system to prove that their child is, in fact, the genius they thought he was. It is true that some students have difficulty in a particular class for any of a host of reasons. It is not true that this is always the teacher's fault. Encountering difficulty in management/staff relationships, teacher/student, parent/child, etc. is a normal part of life and it is important that we as educators and parents give our kids the strategies to work through them rather than avoid them altogether. Then another parent complained:

A second mother, whose child was an A student, also complained to the teacher. She disputed a half-point reduction on a math test on a question about a mixed number and a fraction. She asked that her child's score "be adjusted accordingly."

The mother added in an e-mail to Kevil, "We have been frustrated with this math class. It is hard for me to not view this [test] problem as trying to 'trick' the students."

The teacher wrote back, explaining how she graded the problem and adding: “These issues have manifested themselves into an obvious personality conflict. We both only want what is best for your child. If your perception is that I am perpetually trying to ‘trick’ the students, perhaps this is the time to pursue changing” teachers.

And then another and another - discontent with a teacher tends to snowball in a community. I haven’t seen the math problem in question, but it’s safe to say that a “half-point reduction” on one test doesn’t warrant inciting a lynch mob. Kevil did the right thing by explaining her reasoning in full. One can only wonder how angry the parent’s e-mail was [or if it was one of many] if Ms. Kevil had to suggest that the student consider transferring classes.

It shouldn’t have come to that. If a parent is that unhappy, it’s time for the administration to mediate the conflict and, presumably, support their staff throughout the process. The administrator should determine whether the ruling was fair and if the teacher had done her job properly; if she had, she should be supported. If she hadn’t, she should be disciplined accordingly and given all available resources [especially peer/departamental guidance] to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. What happened? Principal Tedna Taylor wrote the following memo to Ms. Kevil:

“Michelle, I checked the grade averages across the campus and your failing rate is above the sixth grade average. I believe you have as many as 24 percent failing in one class and around 17 percent in the other classes. In the educational climate we are in at the federal, state and campus level, this is not acceptable. NCLB [No Child Left Behind] is clear, no child will be left behind and at BCI we embrace that philosophy. You should have 100 percent passing. We will discuss a plan of action when we return from the holidays.”

Principal Taylor harkens the blandest interpretation possible for No Child Left Behind [NCLB]: that indeed, no child should be left behind. According to Principal Taylor, this school interprets that mission as making sure all students are pushed through the system because the government tells them to do so. It is folly to expect 100% of a teacher’s students to pass; it is deeply offensive to suggest that a failure rate greater than 0% proves that a teacher is ineffective. This tendentious memo speaks volumes about how the Bear Creek Intermediate administration handled the issue. Ms. Kevil sums up her response succinctly:

The teacher says she believed that she was being asked to compromise her standards. “Don’t think I’m going to give grades out when a student doesn’t even deserve it,” she told me.

The Watchdog, the Star-Telegram’s consumer advocacy/news section, reviewed the documentation collected from the struggle between Taylor and Kevil:

The Watchdog reviewed more than 100 pages of letters, memos and e-mails provided by the teacher that show how the situation was handled. Nothing in the documents or in

interviews indicates that the teacher was asked to alter grades. But Kevil said she believed that she was under pressure to do so.

“It put me in a position to regrade, add points, to change your grading policy, to change the material you were presenting so you don’t have any kids failing,” Kevil said. “Honestly, that’s how it was presented to me.”

Few principals are careless enough to express in writing such an embarrassing, shameful stance. Even so, an environment that encourages, “grade inflation and bumping and social promotion,” as Mr. Huey puts it, can pervade a classroom and render a teacher ineffectual. At the least, it creates irreconcilable [and wholly unnecessary] tension between everyone involved: administrators, parents, teachers and, of course, the students who are caught in the middle.

And then the district decided to terminate her contract at the end of her probationary year. Ms. Kevil maintained her will:

Other teachers, she said, told her to just pass the students. “Well, I can’t pass them,” she remembers telling her colleagues. “They have to do the work to pass.”

For that she should be applauded [and her peers who suggested to pass students unjustly should be decried]. Principal Taylor called this a “cop-out statement” and implied that Kevil didn’t know how to motivate students properly. The pressure continued:

The documents provided by Kevil show that Taylor performed walk-throughs during Kevil’s classes, asked administrators to meet with Kevil to discuss her methods, checked grades and tests designed by the teacher and requested that she make sure that her assignments mirrored those of other sixth-grade math teachers.

This is not the supportive environment I mentioned before; based on the evidence in this article and the [brief] testimony of both parties, it is reasonable to conclude that these interventions were closer to bullying than staff support. Kevil requested a transfer and was asked specifically by Taylor whether she was resigning; at that point she withdrew the transfer request and wrote a letter of grievance to the school board. She couldn’t follow it up because she couldn’t afford a lawyer [and in this case, she needs a skilled practitioner of employment law]. Because she didn’t pursue the grievance, the school board was unable to hear her case in full and voted 6-1 not to extend her probationary contract. Trustee Gerry Knowles said:

“A high failure rate, to me, tells me the subject is not being properly taught,” Knowles added.

Apparently Knowles concluded that the only force at work here is Kevil’s inability to teach. Remember, though, the vote wasn’t unanimous:

The lone dissenter in the board vote was Randy Pugh, whose wife is a math teacher at Bear Creek.

Pugh said, "I spoke to Michelle once when she was demanding a higher standard for the children. She was being pressured to lower that standard in order to have children passing, and that concerned me." He said he referred her to the district's grievance policies.

I laud Pugh for not bending to the majority, but the school board should have been more than concerned - horrified would be a more appropriate response - and voted to investigate this situation immediately and to the fullest. They didn't.

Kevil wrote school board members this final statement: "I refuse to compromise my integrity because of an uninformed parent, a weak administration and a district that turns a blind eye."

Kevil and other teachers with a commitment to standards and integrity face persecution by those who lack that will. Kevil's not the first casualty and she won't be the last; as administrators worry endlessly about the accountability of NCLB, exclusion rates and appearing on Newsweek's best schools list, we'll hear about teachers who keep their focus on teaching being thrown under the bus. Students and their parents are in a sense customers with the school serving as the business, but in education the customer is not *always* right.

I have no doubt that Ms. Kevil will approach her next job with the same conviction with which she carried out her duties at BCI . Her next employer will be better for it - and so will her students, who will be given genuine evaluation instead of being cheated by an administration that pushes them through a system with a shameful disregard for their well-being. I would wish Ms. Kevil luck, but those who maintain their integrity require little luck to be successful.

Asked how many of her students failed on the most recent report cards, Kevil answered three out of about 100.

The bad guys may have won the battle, but if teachers like Michelle Kevil stay committed, they won't win the war.

PLEASE CHECK OUT THIS LINK AND READ THE VARIOUS COMMENTS ABOUT THIS ARTICLE TO ENHANCE YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS MATTER. BELOW IS WHAT NAPTA'S PRESIDENT ADDED TO THE SITE, NAPTA:

I read through these posts with frustration aware that all were viewing this issue of teachers and integrity with a very small lens. I cofounded an organization for teachers like Kevil, who have been unfairly treated

because they stood for what was right for children. (I wish Kevil would become a member because she would serve this mission proud.) To the teacher who shared his practical outlook on this - or one must compromise to a point to keep one's job - I say when you are on a slippery slope you need to check if you reached the bottom. Unfortunately, education has sunk so low that children are dying literally and figuratively to tell us about the bullying that is going on not only against them, but against teachers or anyone who doesn't "play the political game." I recently published a book called *White Chalk Crime: The REAL Reason Schools Fail*, in which I put the pieces of this puzzle of how schools got so bad together for outsiders or people whose limited view misleads them. Folks, we are up against tax subsidized propaganda that makes it nearly impossible to see what is REALLY going on. If you look at Kevil's situation within the context of *White Chalk Crime*, or the dirty politics combined with lawlessness going on in our schools, then you can judge this situation accurately. Otherwise, you are floundering without an education trying to define how to educate. Become educated in *White Chalk Crime* and then try to make an impact. All - educators, citizens, or parents, are welcome as members at EndTeacherAbuse.org. This is a problem that needs to be tried in the court of public opinion, but first the public must be educated with the facts of *White Chalk Crime*. You won't get that education anywhere in which those in power have control. And their accomplices range from the unions to the media to anyone with a financial interest in *White Chalk Crime*. Hopefully more people will become educated by those of us who can speak the truth. I for one will not give up as this is about our children and our future.