

What Diploma Are You Worth?

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I hope he makes it, Davina thought to herself as she began arranging the desks. The students would be arriving any minute to take the Global Regents Competency Test. Raul turned up first. This would be his fourth time taking the test.

"What up Miss?" he said

"Good morning Raul," she replied brightly, masking the sinking feeling in her stomach. "You ready?"

"Yes Miss. This is the last time I'm taking this wack test. I wanna get outta here." He sat down, slouched in the seat. "Which test is this again?"

Later on that day as the Special Education department graded the tests, Davina's sinking feeling turned into a pit of stone—Raul had failed the test again.

Davina walked into the Teachers' Room.

"What's eating you Dee?" asked Tom. Though he was new to teaching and to the school, Tom and Davina had become good friends. She took on a kind of mentoring role for him and he was a source of constant encouragement for her.

"Raul failed the Global RCT--again. He may not graduate in June."

"You mean he failed the Global Regents?"

"No, the RCT--Regents Competency Test. In order to graduate, students in New York State have to have 44 credits and pass 5 standardized tests in core subjects."

"I know that."

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"Well for students who receive Special Education services there's a safety net. Instead of having to pass with a 65 score, they can pass with a 55 OR they can take a simpler exam called the RCT. It gets them a local diploma instead of a Regents one."

"Really? So kids in Special Ed. don't have to meet the same state standards in order to graduate? That doesn't seem fair to me. They should graduate with the same skills and content."

"My students are tested just as much, if not more, than general education students. They have to do just as much, if not more! Do you think these tests actually assess what they've learned anyway?"

John Baker came into the room just then. He had been an English teacher for five years.

"What are you guys talking about?"

"Raul still hasn't passed the RCT," Davina said.

"It's too bad he even has to take those anyway. Why aren't teacher-made assessments enough? I've had Raul for two years. His attendance is excellent though he doesn't write much at all in class and he doesn't participate a lot. He puts in a real, consistent effort though. He deserves to pass my course."

"Well I think the standardized tests are important. I may be fresh to the teaching party but I think the Regents do a good job of matching up with the curriculum. Everyone should be assessed in the same way--that's equality," Tom replied.

Davina could feel heat rising to her face. People gave her this argument all the time. "My 10 years as a SETSS Special Ed teacher tell me otherwise. Shouldn't education help you reach your intellectual potential? Does any student deserve to be beat over the head again and again with tests they can't pass? Learning Disabilities are real Tom. I'm not saying assessment is bad. I'm saying assess so that students can really demonstrate learning. Many students with LD do just as well or better than

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average general ed students. But not everyone can show what they know in the same way. For Raul, passing the RCT would be a victory."

"Ok Dee. I don't think we're going to change each other's minds about this right now. I am sorry Raul didn't make it on the RCT though."

"Thanks Tom," Davina said, slumping in her chair as she drank her coffee.

Background

Bronx High School is a New Visions and Magnet high school with a focus on music. It has been open for six years. Normally New Visions schools do not have to accept students who require Special Education services until the third year they are open. Once they begin accepting these students, the only services typically available are Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) or Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT). In SETSS students receive services one period a day to support them in their general education classes. In a CTT setting, students have 2 teachers (one general education, one special education) in each major subject class.

Bronx High has a population of about 25 students in grades 9-12 who receive SETSS, out of a general population of 400. There are two Special Education teachers on staff, who not only support students in their subject classes but also prepare them for the Regents Competency Tests in the event that they do not pass the Regents Exam. Students must pass five Regents or 6 RCT's and obtain all class credits in order to receive a diploma.

Diploma decisions

Davina looked at the list of scores for the five RCT's students who had taken tests that week. It didn't look great. The best success was, Maria, who had passed 3 of the 4 she had taken. Davina thought of the 2nd period sessions where Maria had practiced and practiced with old tests. But she wouldn't graduate in June, she was missing too many credits. Then there was Raul's situation. He had failed every Regents and RCT over the course of 4 years. Unlike Maria though, he had all his class credits.

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He was on track in that way, but not passing tests changed things. There wasn't a diploma for getting all your credits. There was a Regents Diploma and Local Diploma, both contingent on standardized tests.

Guidance Office

Davina walked to the Guidance Office to deliver the RCT scores to Samson Patel, the guidance counselor. They had worked together for years and she knew how much he cared about her students.

“What’s up Ms. Massey?” Samson shouted boisterously.

“I have the scores from the RCT’s. The kids didn’t do so well, except for Maria.”

“Oh man, really?”

“Really.”

“Well Maria doesn’t have the credits so she won’t graduate until August anyway. It’s good that she’s doing well with the tests though. What about Raul?”

“He didn’t make it on any of the tests,” Davina said sadly.

“Oh no! That’s bad news. That means we’re going to give him an IEP diploma in June. He’s about to be 21, which means he’ll age out of the school system.”

“What’s an IEP diploma?”

“It’s a diploma for Special Ed students who can’t pass standardized tests but have good attendance. It basically says that a student came to school and achieved their IEP goals. It has limitations—the military won’t take him and it would be hard, if not impossible, to go to community college if he ever wants to do that.”

Here came that pit of stone feeling again. “Isn’t there anything else we can do?” Davina asked.

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“What else? He hasn’t passed any of the tests and you have to in order to get a Local diploma.”

While Davina knew logically Samson was probably right—what else could they do?—she just did not feel right about where this conversation was going. She fidgeted in her seat.

“Samson, you and I both know that diploma is not good. He deserves more than that.”

Samson sighed.

“I understand where you’re coming from Dee, but there are state standards for each diploma and Raul isn’t meeting them. You know the local means passing 5 Regents with a score between 55 and 64 or 6 RCT’s. Raul is 20 years old right now. He has a serious Learning Disability and he’s been a D student since he got here, which will get you credits but not the test scores. That’s not enough Davina, you know that! Coming everyday is not enough either. Getting credits is crucial but there has to be a standardized way to know what students have learned. How else can the state assess what he’s learned? Every teacher assesses differently. What warrants an 80 for one teacher may warrant a 65 for another. In that case how do we know that a student who receives services didn’t pass simply based on effort as opposed to skill development? He’s held to the same standards as anyone else, and that is as it should be. He still has June, so we’ll see what he does then but realistically, an IEP diploma is what’s going to get him out the door. The paraprofessional training will accept him with it. That might be his best bet.”

Breaking the news

Raul was anxious to find out how he had done on the exams. He really wanted to get out of school in June. He had lasted this long because he knew how much it meant to his mother. He didn’t want to disappoint her. He was tired of these tests. When he sat down to take them, it was like gibberish after a while, especially the writing ones. He

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had never been much of a writer and it scared him. While he hadn't been passing these state tests, he scraped by in class. It was his best but it was good enough. The other students were alright, they made the days far more interesting. He hardly missed an opportunity to get in the mix with them.

Ms. Massey walked back to her classroom.

"Hey Miss. I came to get my scores." Raul was sitting at a desk.

"You could have called you know," she said with a smile, stalling.

"Yeah, but I came by instead."

"Well Raul, it doesn't look good."

"It doesn't?" he already knew where this was going. "Damn!"

"You still have June Raul," Davina said as cheerfully as she could.

"I don't know Miss. I'm sick of taking this test. Do I really need to pass it to get out of here? My job at McDonald's pays pretty good. I'm working my way up to manager."

"Well Raul, I want you to keep your options open. There's a training program to become a paraprofessional. You said you want to work as a school aide so it might be a good match for you."

"Alright Miss, when you tell me more about it, I'll see."

Raul shuffled out of the classroom. *What is he going to do?* thought Davina.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Should Special Education students have to pass high-stakes tests? Do high-stakes tests help students attain educational goals?

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- 2) Do teachers in a school need to share the same framework and understanding of assessments in order to help students maximize their potential? Why or why not?
- 3) What options should schools offer to students like Raul?
- 4) What should a diploma mean (e.g. skill mastery? college readiness?) Should diploma options be aligned with paths to post-secondary education?
- 5) Do small schools provide enough diversity of interventions for students in Special Education?