

CA #2: Take A Stand: Social (In)justice  
The Most Challenged Learners and the Newest Educators: An Appropriate Combination?

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**Topic Inspiration:**

Large Urban Public High School

Figure 1: Snapshot of Principal's Dashboard, Teacher Profile, January 2018

Teacher Profile	FY17 EOY	FY18 YTD
Tch Count	187	200
Abs. Rate	5.6%	3.4%
Vacancies	N/A	1
Sub Fill Rate	N/A	50.0%
Obs. Count	N/A	75
% L 1/2 Students w/ Tchr 0-3 yr exp.	89.6%	82.8%

**Focus question:**

Does having our least experienced teachers leading those with the highest academic needs negatively impact achievement, and, if so, what can be done to change this?

**School Structure**

In order for this social justice assignment to make sense, one must have context of the school site to be studied. In this case, it is a large, urban, public school in South Florida. The demographics, listed below, show a school that is predominantly white, followed by Hispanic and black students, as indicated in Figure 2.

When one looks at the comparison of prior year to current year, one can see that the number of students enrolled at the school has grown, and that there is an increase in Hispanic student enrollment, ELL student enrollment, and, in addition, an increase in the number of students who qualify to participate in the free/reduced lunch program offered to all students if they apply.

Figure 2: Snapshot of Principal's Dashboard, School Profile, January 2018

School Profile	Prior Yr	Crt Yr
Schl Grade	A	A
Enrollment	3,395	3,576
Black	10%	10%
Hispanic	26%	27%
White	57%	56%
Other	7%	7%
ELL	7%	8%
SWD	11%	11%
FRL	37%	40%
Mobility	2%	1%
Over Age	7%	6%

*Accelerated Coursework Enrollment*

Another piece of information that helps to tell the story of the school to be reviewed within this assignment is the accelerated enrollment rate, as indicated below in Figure 3. This shows that, year-to-year enrollment in accelerated coursework has gone up overall (ex. from 68.8% in FY17 to 71.9% in FY18), though it has gone down for some subgroups (ex. black females). This high rate of enrolment in accelerated coursework stems both from the Strategic Plan that has been implemented district-wide (The School District of Palm Beach County, 2016), and, from the push from site-based leadership to ensure that students are enrolled in coursework that is just at/above students' level of academic ability to encourage academic growth.

Figure 3: Snapshot of Principal's Dashboard, High School Acceleration, January 2018

HS Accel	Accel FY17 Enroll	Accel FY17 Ach	Accel FY18 Enroll
Total	68.8%	86.7%	71.9%
White Fem	82.0%	88.4%	84.6%
Black Fem	58.9%	74.2%	56.4%
Hisp. Fem	68.2%	91.9%	72.1%
ELL Fem	35.9%	86.1%	39.6%
SWD Fem	30.8%	71.1%	38.7%
White Male	71.4%	86.8%	75.0%
Black Male	36.7%	70.0%	39.5%
Hisp. Male	53.6%	82.8%	56.2%
ELL Male	27.3%	93.3%	36.8%
SWD Male	27.6%	71.4%	26.9%

### *Student Discipline*

The final piece of information that is essential to understand about the school site to be reviewed in this topic is discipline, as outlined below in Figure 4. When reviewing these figures, one must keep in mind that this is a duplicated number, meaning that students who have earned multiple office discipline referrals (ODR) are counted once for each referral earned rather than only one time. Even so, this is part of the picture of the climate at this school and some of the statistics contained within it are alarming (ex. duplicated black male ODR rate of 40.5% and unduplicated black female ODR rate of 23.3%). These data demonstrate that although there is a high level of enrollment in accelerated coursework, there is also a high level of students of color who are earning disciplinary action. Part of this assignment will explore the notion that, possibly, there is an observable qualitative connection between the two leading to a situation of social injustice.

Figure 4: Snapshot of Principal's Dashboard, Student Discipline, January 2018

Student Dis.	ODR	ISS	OSS
<b>Total</b>	<b>14.7%</b>	<b>4.9%</b>	<b>3.3%</b>
White Female	7.4%	1.6%	1.1%
Black Female	23.3%	10.5%	7.0%
Hisp. Female	9.4%	2.1%	1.6%
ELL Female	11.2%	3.7%	2.2%
SWD Female	12.9%	6.5%	4.5%
White Male	16.4%	4.2%	4.8%
Black Male	40.5%	21.1%	5.4%
Hisp. Male	18.9%	8.5%	4.0%
ELL Male	24.3%	8.8%	4.4%
SWD Male	25.7%	10.2%	7.3%

### Societal Connection

In a landmark decision in the case of *Pierce vs. The Society of Sisters* (1925), it was ruled that individual states had the right to compel schooling, though they did not have the right to compel public schooling (Justia, 2018). South Florida is one of the most densely populated regions in the United States (Rabin, 2016) and, thus, there are many schools, both public and private in the area in which this school is located.

One must concede, therefore, that society is accepting of the necessity of schooling and, in addition, the steep demand for the availability of high-quality public education. In an area so densely populated with a wide variety of both public and private schools to choose from, it stands to reason that many parents/guardians make specific housing choices (if economically feasible) to send their adolescents to the institution which they perceive will provide the highest quality education.

At the school being studied, the culture is one of academic excellence and a focus on college-level coursework taken at the high school level. Students within the school have achieved at the highest levels. The student enrollment within said school has grown

exponentially over the past few years. As Figure 2 indicates, enrollment as of January 2018 was 3,576 students, a figure which puts the school over 130% capacity. It stands to reason, then, that “society” is in agreement not only with the notion of schooling, but, that what is perceived as a high-quality education is available from this institution.

It is within this defined, academically-focused structure that one must consider the words of John Dewey who proposed that, “practical pedagogic thinking ... is the product of social interactions and cultural practices [making] education a primary factor in development” (Olson, 2003, p.141). This particular institution is specifically designed to shape social interactions of adolescents around the collegiate model with the goal of ensuring that the vast majority of students are prepared for collegiate study upon graduation.

What theorists such as Dewey may not have accounted for was that adolescents do not each have a cookie-cutter childhood (Lareau, 2003). Indeed, adolescents are going to have a very different social, emotional, and cultural approach to life and academics purely as a result of where they were born and to whom they were born. It is the responsibility of the school to provide an education that can level the playing field, which likely accounts for the oversized population of students at this school site.

### **The Role of Democracy**

The United States was built on the foundation of a democratic, capitalist society. The very root of this means that all citizens have a voice through the ability to vote and put officials in office, though, it is essential to keep in mind that the very definition of a citizen has changed over time and this has meant that the American Dream itself has shifted (Beach, 2007). With the ability to put people in office comes the ability to remove people from office if the public perceives that the person in power has not met her/his position with adequate ability.

Philosopher John Dewey felt that schooling needed to meet the educational needs of the greater society by defining that was needed by the critical masses, and, design instruction in such a way that those who completed an educational program of study were ready to effectively communicate upon completion of said program (Noddings, 2016). In order to understand the very demands of the community, one must consider that all (or as many as possible) people must have a voice.

It stands to reason, then, that in schools (particularly public schools) that parents/guardians would have the ability to also have a voice. This is often represented through the school board which typically consists of laypeople who guide school districts and give a voice on behalf of the people they represent. This is an interesting concept because what happens is that the elected school board members may not represent the entire constituency but, instead, the population who chose to vote when it came time. As such, voter demographics play a huge role and, often, voter turnout is not necessarily reflective of the complete demographics of the community at large and some voices go unheard.

In a large urban public school, the results can be very much the same. Those parents/guardians who are very vocal in the community are often affluent (Lareau, 2003). As Lareau (2003) suggests, this may also be a result of cultural reasons (ex. for some, it would be improper to question the authority of educational leaders since they are experts). As a current administrator, viewing parent/guardian attendance at open house can be a very simple way to notice which classrooms are often full (advanced, accelerated courses) and which classrooms are nearly empty (intensive reading, regular-level core classes).

When parents/guardians who are involved and vocal perceive that the educator in front of their adolescent is not effective, they are not afraid to reach out to educational leaders and voice

their concerns. They are worried about whether or not the educator can effectively teach their students and will suggest intervention (ex. training, termination, etc.). Often, the teachers who struggle the most with elements like classroom management, time management, and other facets are the ones who are new to the profession. This is especially true in Florida, where one only requires a Bachelor's degree and a passed content exam to obtain a temporary teaching certificate.

Why, then, when looking at Figure 1, is there a preponderance of teachers who are new to the profession (0-3 years) teaching the students who are scoring at the lowest levels academically at this particular school? Although the percentage has dropped from FY17 to FY18, there are still over 80% of students who need the most and strongest support possible who are being taught by those with the least experience. The reasons for this are myriad and will be explored later in this paper, but, it hardly seems like a democracy since it is hard to imagine any stakeholder group speaking out to have the least experienced teachers teaching the academically neediest students.

## **Reasons for the Current Structure**

### *Financial Incentives*

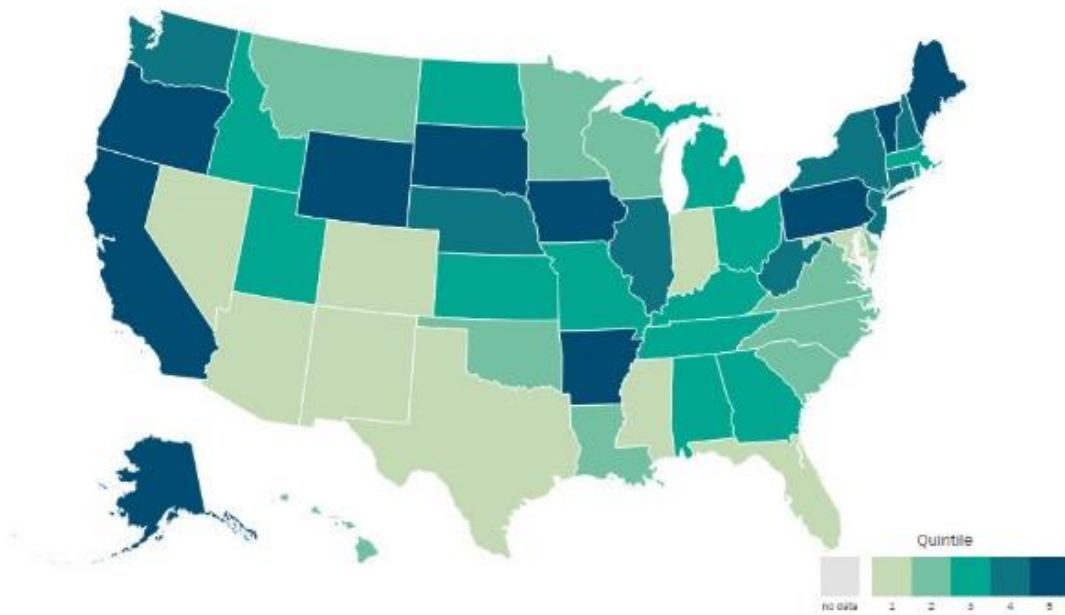
There are a variety of reasons for what has led to the current structure. As an example, compensation is something that many teachers rightfully consider in a capitalistic society. The very manner in which the system is set up is as follows: if a school earns a grade of "A" from the Florida Department of Education, there is a financial reward that the instructional staff decides how to split and this plan must be approved by the School Advisory Committee. While this financial incentive is not a massive bonus, it is something that educators are glad to have for all of the work that they put in.

The concern is this: for those who do not teach collegiate courses (ex. Advanced



Placement (AP) through the College Board or Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE)), the financial incentives end there. The result, therefore, is that teachers often want to adjust their career trajectory once they gain experience and realize that there is additional bonus money to be earned (specifically, \$50 for each student who passes the standardized AICE/AP exam that their students took during the school year – *with no cap on those earnings!*). This has led to some teachers earning in excess of \$10,000.00 USD of bonus compensation. That is certainly a strong incentive in a state which, as outlined below, falls in the lowest quintile for desirability due to specific factors such as compensation as outlined in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Teaching Attractiveness Rating by State (Learning Policy Institute, 2016)



As a result of the current structure, those who teach the students who are strongest academically have the greatest potential to earn financial incentives, and, this has led to a natural progression each year where veteran teachers request to move to these position, leaving the new, open positions that the school building leader needs to fill being the ones that are often the

neediest students, creating this very problem, and, realistically, this social injustice.

This leads the author to several questions for which the answers are murky at best:

- Do AICE/AP teachers work harder than teachers who teach intensive reading?
- Do teachers who teach the foundational courses at the beginning of a high school student's career that have led them to find success in collegiate classes later in their career not deserve a piece of the financial incentive beyond the A+ bonus (if the school is even an A)?
- Is it inherently wrong to want to teach students who achieve at higher levels with a potentially higher financial incentive?

#### *Uneven Parent/Guardian Involvement*

Potentially exacerbating this problem is that, as previously mentioned, the parents/guardians of many students at the lowest academic levels are not as involved/vocal in the academic careers of their children (Lareau, 2003). As a result, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the school based administrators to determine what path is the most appropriate to take. This seems as though it is a cycle which needs to be broken, but, one must also remember that the financial incentive systems are not being created by school-based educational leaders, they are being developed and implemented by policymakers, which brings high politics into the discussion.

#### *High Politics*

When considering the policies that are put in place which potentially lead to the perpetuation of the cycle where the students who need the greatest levels of support academically are taught by the teachers with the least amount of experience, one need look no further than the

political spectrum. Those for change and those against change are leading to a strange paradigm (Lewis, 2015) where changes are made and are often reversed. For example, since 2010, Florida has changed the exam required for reading proficiency from the FCAT, to the FCAT 2.0, and now to the FSA ELA exam.

These continued changes make it hard to connect data from year-to year and cause issues with understanding whether or not students are truly learning what they need to learn. When that is coupled with a high rate of teacher turnover (TNTP, 2012) it causes a lack of consistency for those who need it the most. In fact, at the school being reviewed, classroom space is at a major premium and, as a result, the school building leaders in charge of the master board make it a priority to ensure that those teaching Intensive Reading courses have the stability of a home-base classroom rather than requiring them to move from room to room.

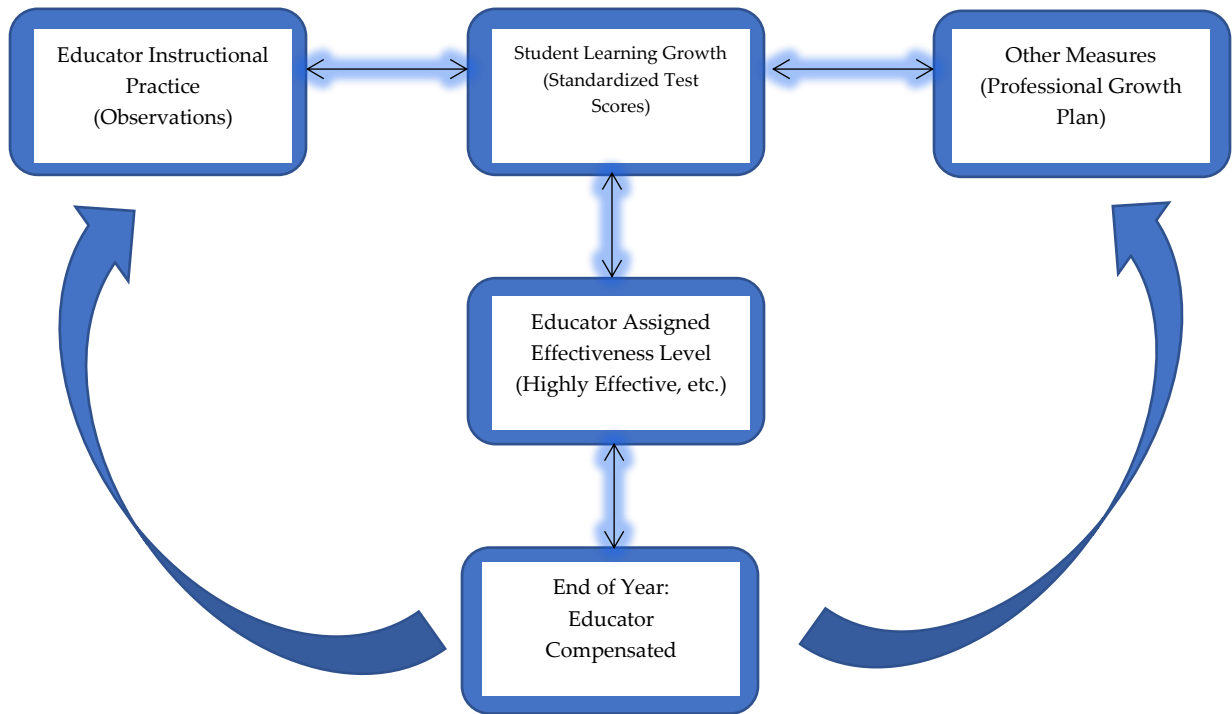
Shifting back to how politics effects this social justice concern, specifically, is the notion of pay for performance or merit pay where educators' compensation (at least in part) is determined by how students perform on academic achievement as determined by scores on standardized exams. This idea formally became law in Florida on July 1, 2011 as a result of Senate Bill 736 entitled the "Student Success Act" (The Florida Senate, 2011). Of major concern is the question of whether or not the research behind merit pay is truly effective or not, or, if the chicken was put before the egg.

### **Research Connections**

In order to appropriately discuss merit pay, one must understand the compensation model which is in place in the school district wherein the school being discussed in this paper lies. Although student achievement is part of educator compensation, it is only one piece of the model. Figure 5, below, outlines how the structure looks for educator compensation within the

district.

Figure 5: Sample Merit-Based Pay Compensation Model



There is a plethora of research on the subject of merit pay and there have been mixed results on its effectiveness (Gius, 2013; Podgursky & Springer, 2006; Posnick-Goodwin, 2014; Shuls & Maranto, 2014; Springer et al., 2010). In Tennessee, a program called the Project on Incentives in Teaching (POINT) was implemented to determine whether student achievement would statistically increase if teachers were offered large financial bonuses (Springer et al., 2010). The study found that, generally, the students who were taught by teachers with the possibility for large financial incentive did not statistically outperform their peers.

This is of great interest when juxtaposed with the reality of the structure in place at the high school herein discussed. Many teachers are working to try and shift what they are teaching to the higher levels, likely at least in part due to the financial rewards that come with teaching those higher levels in addition the likelihood that they will have fewer reluctant or challenged

learners in the class. So, if the data on merit pay is murky at best, perhaps a policy change could make a major difference in how teachers decide what it is they want to teach.

### **Proposed Solutions**

To make a major impact on the issue outlined in Figure 1, it is herein proposed that a policy change be considered which would share the financial rewards earned by AICE/AP instructors with those teaching non-AICE/AP coursework. Since all instructional staff gets a share of the money earned by the school for retaining an “A” (and, chooses to share a portion with the non-instructional staff) all instructors should get a cut of the monies earned from passing AICE/AP scores as well. If they choose to share it with non-instructional staff then even better since it would go a long way to continue to keep the shared culture.

Some instructional staff may argue that they and they alone earn the money (\$50/student) for the passed AICE/AP exam in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, but, should the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Intensive Reading teacher not be rewarded for helping bring students up to grade level to allow students the opportunity to even have a chance of passing those exams by the time they get to 11<sup>th</sup> grade? If the financial rewards were shared, it stands to reason that it may break the cycle which is being perpetuated causing the most experienced teachers to shy away from teaching the very students who stand to learn the most from them.

Let it be known that the author of this paper knows that such a change could cause a *massive* uproar from the instructional staff, and, their reaction would be understandable. If this change were to take place, it would need to take place at a much higher level than the individual school site. It would certainly need to come from the state and/or district, and, would also likely need to be bargained by the teacher unions.

If, then, the change did come from that level it would afford district leaders the

opportunity to explain the reasons and data behind the change and, perhaps, instructors would see that the main premise of this proposed solution is to put our most challenged learners in the hands of the most experienced teachers and create a cycle that will help those students gain the strongest foundation possible from the very earliest days of their adolescent education, and, promote a culture of shared success, potentially leading to and even higher graduation rate, and, more AICE/AP tests being passed meaning that it would actually put more money in the pockets of all teachers rather than large amounts of money going to individual teachers.

It is not that the individual AICE/AP teachers are not working hard and the author does not want to be misunderstood. That is not the premise of this argument. The argument is that it takes a village to get students to the level where they are able to successfully take AICE and AP tests during their time in high school, and, that teachers who teach the students who need the most intervention and support also deserve the chance at a major incentive that is currently, thanks to policy, only being made available to those who teach the students who are academically at the highest of levels. Where is the justice in that?

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