

Scandal at Placido High: Coincidence or Conspiracy¹

Placido is a small, bedroom community with a population of nearly 12,000. Its public schools enjoy a fine reputation. Parents are interested and involved in the education of their children. Last week, during high school graduation ceremonies, the president of the Board of Education spoke proudly of the recognition the district has received for high student scores at all grade levels on statewide tests.

The Superintendent of Schools, Debra Bass, has just completed her third year in Placido. The members of the community have been very pleased with her performance and members of the Board of Education recently renewed her contract. Dr. Bass is a student-centered educator who has attempted to heighten the sensitivity of the professional staff to the needs of all students. She had just concluded a regular Monday meeting with her administrative team when she received a phone call from a representative of the National Testing Corporation (NTC).

Robert Bender, the NTC representative, informed Superintendent Bass that he had received a letter from three recent graduates of Placido High School. In their letter, the students claimed to have had an unfair advantage over the thousands of students in other high schools all over the country who were administered a University Placement Exam on May 13. They noted that they had received prior knowledge of four of the five reading passages on the interpretative section of the exam and two of the three passages on the translation section several days prior to the exam from their teacher, Mr. Will Johnson. The students enclosed photocopies of the passages in question with their letter. They explained that they waited until after graduation to reveal the impropriety for fear of jeopardizing final course grades and their graduation, even though they did nothing wrong or dishonest.

Dr. Bass requested a meeting with Mr. Bender to discuss the situation and to determine jointly how the investigation of the allegations would proceed. Mr. Bender politely informed Dr. Bass that NTC had an established procedure to investigate these situations, but he would be pleased to meet with her to discuss how NTC planned to proceed. He made it clear to the superintendent

that NTC would safeguard the identity of the graduates who sent the letter and assured her that no other contacts would be made until after their meeting, scheduled for the next morning.

The superintendent immediately called Hal Curry, the high school principal. Principal Curry was appointed principal January 1, upon the retirement of his predecessor. He served as assistant principal for 12 years prior to the appointment and he knew the faculty, students and community well. The superintendent arranged to meet Principal Curry in 30 minutes to brief him and to plan a course of action.

Dr. Bass knew that the Director of Student Services, Lorna Leonard, was responsible for both test security and test administration. NTE is an independent organization that contracts with school districts to have their exams administered during normal school hours by school employees. Exam packets are delivered to each site by courier to the designated test coordinator, who has the responsibility to keep them secure until their administration on a specified day and time.

Lorna, the designated coordinator for Placido, has been in the district for twenty-eight years and was currently on vacation, not due to return for ten days. Will Johnson, the teacher of that particular university placement course, already had departed for summer break with the rest of the non-administrative professional staff. Superintendent Bass placed a phone call to the president of the Board to inform him of the situation and promised to report back after she had met the NTC representative the next day.

Principal Curry was visibly shaken as the superintendent conveyed the allegations. He felt responsible for the actions of his staff and often reminded staff members that, “the buck stopped at his desk.” The possibility that innocent students would suffer negative consequences as a result of inappropriate behavior by one of their teachers really upset both the principal and superintendent.

A search of the records revealed that fifteen students, nine seniors and six juniors, were administered the exam at the high school in May. Superintendent Bass reminded the principal that it was important to conduct a thorough investigation while safeguarding the privacy and

rights of all parties. They agreed that Principal Curry would call the fifteen students who took the exam to request a private meeting with each student and his/her parents. He also would also attempt to contact Will Johnson, the teacher, and Lorna Leonard, Director of Student Services, immediately.

By late afternoon, the principal had made contact with six of the students. He provided his home phone number and requested that each have a parent call him later that evening. He left a message for Lorna Leonard at her vacation home. There was no response to the call to Will Johnson's home. A check of the teacher's contact card revealed a summer address in a resort community several hours away by auto, but no other phone number. The principal planned to make calls from his home that night with hopes of contacting Will Johnson and all involved students.

During their meeting the following morning, Robert Bender provided the superintendent a copy of the letter, names removed, and copies of the passages that he received. Although the students never saw a copy of the exam prior to its administration, they claimed that during the review process, Mr. Johnson specifically reviewed and focused on four reading passages and two translation passages which comprised the vast majority of the exam. Mr. Bender described the procedures that the NTC would follow in the investigation. He explained that all the individual tests of the students from Placido had been analyzed and that none of their scores would be reported. Students would be given an opportunity to retake another form of the exam at no cost, as soon as a mutually convenient time could be arranged. Superintendent Bass was surprised by the hasty decision, but offered complete cooperation and expressed the desire of the district to get to the truth.

She suggested that NTC use offices in the school to meet with students and any staff members they wished to interview. Mr. Bender thanked the superintendent and informed her that his staff would begin contacting the students immediately. He asked the superintendent to arrange interviews with the high school principal, guidance counselors, Lorna Leonard and Will Johnson.

Dr. Bass explained that some of the individuals were on vacation, but she would attempt to contact them and make arrangements for the interviews as soon as possible.

The superintendent was upset. She knew that it was just a matter of time before the local newspaper got wind of the “scandal.” Parents of innocent students would be outraged that their children were being required to retake the exam. To make matters worse, the high school principal was not able to make contact with the teacher. Lorna Leonard had returned the principal’s call last evening and promised to return to Placido by the beginning of next week. Principal Curry had made appointments to meet with eleven of the students beginning that evening, determined that two were on vacation for the week, and left a message for the other two students.

A call to the Board president only generated questions. Were the testing materials secured? Who had access to the keys to the storage area? Was it possible that the allegations were untrue? What should be done about the public relations nightmare that was emerging? All these questions had run through the superintendent’s mind, along with dozens of others. The president of the Board agreed to brief all other Board members and instructed the superintendent to have a special Board meeting advertised for next Monday evening.

Superintendent Bass prepared a press release and called the editor of the local paper and arranged to meet. She drafted a letter to Will Johnson and sent a copy to his home and vacation addresses via Express Mail. The teacher has been the instructor of the university placement course every year since its inception at Placido High. He has attended annual summer training sessions and boasted that his students always performed well. However, Will Johnson’s performance in his other classes was not stellar. The superintendent really needed to speak with him.

During the meetings that followed, the principal assured each of the students and their parents that he expected them to tell the truth. No matter what they revealed to him or during interviews with NTC, there would be no reprisals. The principal assured them that everyone wanted to

know what happened and that he would deal with anyone, student or faculty member, who had done anything dishonest or inappropriate.

Wednesday morning brought the anticipated headline “Honest Students Report Unfair Advantage” as well as dozens of calls from concerned parents and community members. It also brought some very disturbing information conveyed to the principal during meetings with two of the students.

One of the students, a junior, claimed to have received an exam packet that was torn open. At that time, he verbally expressed that fact loud enough for others in the room to hear. The student noted that Ms. Leonard did not respond to his statement, continued to give test instructions, and reminded the students that they were on a tight schedule. The other student reported that within a day of the exam, she and at least five other students had gone to a teacher “they trusted,” Mrs. Anne Bishop, to express their concern that they “knew more than they should” when they took the exam.

The phone rang. The president of the board of education asked for a report on findings. He also expressed the collective opinion of several board members, including his own, that the teacher should be dismissed. The scandal was the talk of the community. Honest students were being punished by having to take another exam because of Johnson’s actions. Will Johnson had gone too far and perhaps he had not acted alone. The superintendent’s requests to “not to jump to conclusions” had fallen on deaf ears. She urged the board president to be patient and give her the opportunity to get to the facts of the incident.

As Dr. Bass hung up, her secretary gave her a message from the local newspaper editor requesting a return call as soon as possible. She placed the call and much to her chagrin was asked to verify the charge that, during the test administration, one of the students had been given an examination packet that had previously been opened.

Things were really spinning out of control. Priorities must be established and decisions must be made! Assume that you are the superintendent:

- Do circumstances suggest a conspiracy? How can the principal and superintendent find out? What are key communication channels?
- What happens to communication within the organization during the summer when schools are closed for vacation? How can some of the impediments to effective communication be overcome?
- What should the superintendent communicate to the board? How? When?
- Discuss the superintendent's public relations strategy. Is public relations the same as communication?
- What other groups should be involved in the communication process? When? How?
- What are the political ramifications of the incident? How can the negative consequences be anticipated and controlled?
- Develop two scenarios, one in which the teacher is innocent of the charges and one in which he is not. If true, are the charges grounds for dismissal of a tenured teacher?
- What should the superintendent do if she finds that all the evidence is circumstantial and the teacher and director deny any wrongdoing?
- What is the appropriate stance with the media?
- How can such a situation be avoided in the future? Are new district policy and procedures about testing required?

1. Written by Dr. Michael DiPaola from Hoy, W, K. & Miskel, C. (2001). *Educational Administration: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: McGraw Hill.