

The Supervisor

ANNE MEEK

The FRIWAFTT Award

Eugene rushed into my office that winter afternoon for a session of talk about our work in classrooms, affecting his usual jaunty stride and his customary courtly manners, but this time bursting with talk. "What do you know," he began, "about this Cassandra Taylor?"

I stammered what I knew: she was known as a mediocre teacher but she liked her students well enough; she could teach a good lesson when she tried; and she was the daughter of a local and vocal politician and therefore more or less untouchable, or at least subject to a relaxed standard of performance. I finished lamely, saying I had observed her myself during her last evaluation year, and she had been "all right," which means conspicuously pedestrian.

I was embarrassed to admit these things to Eugene, but he had to know. He had a career to think about, too, and he had already been brash enough to have provoked unfavorable attention in the system. He needed to know that Cassandra's principal, her former supervisor, and I had all followed the well-used supervisory strategy known as "lay low."

He went on, as if he just had to get it out, "I observed her today, and I never saw anything like it before. There were kids on the floor, and she didn't know it. There were kids off-task all over the room, and she wasn't even monitoring their behavior—"

"You were taking notes?" I interrupted.

"Five pages," he said and dashed to get them, talking over his shoulder as he went. I was trying to figure out what a good mentor should do.

It was too late to give Eugene the scoop on Cassandra Taylor. He had straightforwardly done his duty. I began to wonder if it was just this kind of full-speed-ahead attention to duty that had propelled him into difficulty with

the superintendent and resulted in his placement as a systemwide evaluator, rather than as a high school principal.

He returned, and I held out my hand. Sure enough, he had taken five pages of notes during a 45-minute lesson. While I glanced over them, he continued in tones of amazement and disbelief to describe what he had seen.

"What about the conference?" I asked.

"Oh, we had a conference," he nodded. "We had a conference for two and a half hours. I went over everything with her."

"I told her, 'Cassandra, even I could teach reading better than you did this morning. You did not establish set, you did not set purposes for reading, you did not have them use their new words in sentences.'..." He rattled off all the weaknesses he had seen and all the recommendations he had made.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said this was not a good class, they had no self-discipline, they were working on it, but she had to go ahead and teach—all that kind of thing."

"I had observed her myself during her last evaluation year, and she had been 'all right,' which means conspicuously pedestrian."

"But I said to her, 'Don't you think it's a serious problem when you've got kids crawling around on the floor during a reading lesson? Don't you think you ought to make them sit in their seats?'"

"And that's not all." He looked at me with an intense gaze. "Just guess what else. She's up for the career ladder—Level III—she's going for Level III, and she didn't establish set! You know what I said to her? I said, 'Ms. Taylor, you and I better get busy. I'll come back and work with you, and I'll send in the reading consultant, and we'll get you ready for that state evaluator. But we just can't go on like today.'"

"Eugene," I said, in amusement and admiration, "you put me to shame. I don't deserve to stand on the same ground with you, but I am proud to. But just let me warn you, you're going to win the FRIWAFTT award at the next big coffee break."

"Free-waft?" he asked.

"Yes," I said and spelled, "F-R-I-W-A-F-T-T, which stands for Fools-Rush-In-Where-Angels-Fear-To-Tread. You rushed right in when the rest of us sold out. Will you shake my hand?"

Eugene did everything he said he would to help Ms. Taylor, but she failed to make the Career Ladder all the same. I heard she made a career change last summer; maybe, after such a discouraging turn of events, she counseled herself right out of the classroom.

We never did convene the supervisors for a full regalia coffee break to give Eugene his award. But he got another kind of reward: he helped Cassandra Taylor to confront her adult responsibilities at last, and he became a new standard for the rest of us jaded old pros. □

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