

Exposing Shameful Little Secrets
Head for the Edge, 2003-04
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Brian was a school-wide secret we all guiltily shared: a senior that would graduate but could not read.

In 1976, I started my career in education as the world's worst high school English teacher. In every class, I soon discovered a significant number of "Brians" who could not read even the least challenging materials.

Teaching a fulltime load, sponsoring multiple extra curricular activities; and moonlighting at a gas station left me little time to deal with Brian, so he and I struck the same unspoken deal he'd made with his other teachers: "I'll behave in class; you'll pass me with a D." I feel guilty to this day that I kept the secret that doomed Brian to a life of illiteracy.

Fast forward to 1996. Minnesota instituted an eighth grade reading test that students needed to pass to graduate from high school. Suddenly the Brians were outed. My school could no longer hide those students who could not demonstrate a minimum level of reading proficiency. The state released numbers comparing how many Brians we had compared to other schools. As a result, something unprecedented happened. The district reached deeply into its pockets and found the spare change necessary to provide remedial instruction for the Brians. By the time that first group of eighth graders graduated, all but one had passed the test.

The professional literature is filled with condemnations of the No Child Left Behind law. But are educators so busy criticizing the means that they've forgotten the goal of the program: that schools must address the learning needs of every student?

NCLB requires districts to disaggregate student test scores by ethnic and other subgroups. In doing so, our high performing school found that its LEP (limited English proficiency) students lagged in achievement compared to other LEP students in the state. Guess what? The district is actively studying the problem and my crystal ball says it will find the where-with-all needed to improve the LEP program very quickly.

Rather than dwelling on ulterior political motives, educators and especially librarians should work to meet the spirit of the legislation by using it as a springboard for improving instruction for struggling students. Library media specialists can help by:

1. **Designing reading programs and providing materials especially for the subgroups causing a school to be identified as not making AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress).** Smart schools are figuring out that just increasing standard reading instruction does not work and are looking for other strategies, including having children extensively read materials of high interest. Our library programs are critical partners in such programs.
2. **Modifying and improving research assignments for at risk students.** Ruby Payne makes a compelling argument in her very important book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (aha!process, inc., 2003) that students living in poverty need assignments that are relevant, applicable to everyday life, and personal. Our information literacy projects should be modified to help meet the needs of those kids. (For some practical suggestion about how this can be done, take a look at "Designing Research Assignments Students (and Teachers) Love," in MultiMedia Schools, Nov/Dec. 1999 <www.infotoday.com/MMSchools/nov99/johnson.htm>.)
3. **Helping educate the public about alternative ways of assessing student performance.** One scary aspect of NCLB is its over-reliance on standardized tests as a measurement of student performance. The general public believes such tests are reliable, objective and understandable despite the fact they measure only a few basic skills and penalize students who are poor test-takers. Assessment tools that assess higher level thinking skills

and the application of skills are also necessary. As librarians, we need to keep using and promoting authentic assessment tools and educating parents about their usefulness.

4. **Gaining awareness of the NCLB requirements and lobbying for change.** As school leaders, librarians should be helping educate the public about all dimensions of effective schools and the problems in the NCLB law. Can a school be “good” if NCLB deems it not meeting “adequate yearly progress?” Certainly in many ways. Do school reforms that truly insure that “no child is left behind” cost money? Most likely. Could public education be weakened instead of strengthened as a result of NCLB? Perhaps. We need to get and stay informed and find venues to express our concerns to the public and our legislators.

We may never meet the ambitious NCLB literacy goal of 100% by 2013. But as we learned in Minnesota with our reading test, it may well get us much closer to that goal. It is in our professional and students’ best interests if we look upon NCLB as a challenge and an impetus for change – not simply an injustice to rail against.

None of us should have to keep a secret like Brian.