

After Almost Thirty Years

Mr. Abernathy, newly appointed principal of a metropolitan senior high school housing almost 3,000 students, just shakes his head in disbelief as he reviews the teaching records of “his” staff. With his assistant principals’ assistance, he and his team will supervise and appraise 223 teachers this year. Ms. Bloomberg, the superintendent with two years of record in Needville, suggested during their first meeting after his hiring, that he become familiar with the records of certain employees before the start of the school year. Mr. Abernathy has fifteen years of experience elsewhere as a principal, but never in his life has he seen such a case as the one that he is now reviewing. He is reading the records of Mr. Stan Blackwell, an African-American teacher/coach who has been with Needville Independent School District for almost 30 years. The man has served as the head football coach, as a defensive coach, a baseball coach, a health teacher at the junior and senior high schools, as a social studies teacher of world history at the high school, and as a teacher in driver education. He has been fired twice. Each occasion occurred with a different board of education. Both times he was re-hired immediately after board elections in May when a major change in leadership took place. How this man has managed to keep his job was and is a mystery.

As Mr. Abernathy continues to read through the evaluation forms, he sees very few items that are truly detrimental to Mr. Blackwell’s record. Both instances of termination are related to insubordination, yet clear evidence of that charge is not present in the records. Ms. Bloomberg says that she has no knowledge of what occurred during these actions. Nevertheless, here he is – back on staff. There are enough “red flags” here to keep a watch on this man, Mr. Abernathy thought.

As Mr. Abernathy creates supervisory assignments for the year, he decides to keep Mr. Blackwell on his own list. Typically, the department chair would evaluate/appraise each of the department members and one assistant principal would serve as a second appraiser. The overall rating is made in a meeting of the two appraisers. If needed, a third person, the principal, observes the same party to bring some clarity to the evaluation.

This year Mr. Blackwell is scheduled to teach world history and driver education. As the first two months of the school year pass, Mr. Abernathy learns that Mr. Blackwell is rather lackadaisical about signing in and signing out, about paying attention during faculty meetings, and about preparing lesson plans on time. He has issued two reminders, one oral and one written, to Mr. Blackwell about signing in and out on entering and leaving the high school campus. He has also spoken to Mr. Blackwell about his reading of the newspaper during a faculty meeting and about submitting his lesson plans on time.

The latest concern comes from a parent. Mr. Turner has a freshman daughter who is in Mr. Blackwell's world history class. His daughter reports that Mr. Blackwell is very upset about the continuing, warlike attitude of the President of the United States and frequently uses incidents from history to move the discussion to the present time. He talks frequently about U.S. nation-building, about the U.S. interference in the operation of other countries, and about the U.S. attempts to control oil flow—strictly for her own benefit. Mr. Turner, a retired veteran who is now owner of his own insurance agency, is very unhappy with all of the statements and says that he expects you, as principal, to stop such happenings promptly. Mr. Abernathy assures him that he will check into all of these reports.

As soon as Mr. Turner leaves the office, Mr. Abernathy sends e-mail to the superintendent, Ms. Bloomberg, to notify her that Mr. Blackwell may become a problem sooner than expected. Mr. Abernathy also calls in the department chair, Mr. Browning, and asks him if he has heard about any of these concerns raised by Mr. Turner. Mr. Browning states that he noted there were some rather boisterous discussions in Mr. Blackwell's class lately, but he does not know about the content. The principal directs Mr. Browning to make several walk-through observations and make notes on what he hears.

At last he decides he must call Mr. Blackwell into the office to inquire about his teaching. One particular point of inquiry focuses on the possibility that he is using the class as a means to advance his own political views. Mr. Abernathy finds the response from Mr. Blackwell less than helpful. He is curt in his responses. He says that if the principal wants to know exactly what he is teaching, he should read the lesson plans. He follows those faithfully. Mr. Blackwell denies any use of the classroom as a platform for his own political views. He leaves the office in a huff stating, "I don't know why the administration here always has a difficult time getting along with me. Maybe it's because I am only one of a few black people on the faculty."

After hearing that statement, Mr. Abernathy decides to write up the conversation, have Mr. Blackwell come in and sign the summary statement that will also include a reminder about his earlier behavior and the Code of Ethics which states, "The educator shall comply with all written school board policies and state and federal laws."

After several walk-through observations, Mr. Browning reports that he has heard some comments that have been targeted negatively toward the current President and his

policies, but it was always in context of the larger historical setting. Mr. Browning asked for guidance on how much of that should be allowed. He could understand how some would think that this teacher was promulgating his own current political views with such statements.

After receiving two more parent complaints much like that of Mr. Turner, Mr. Abernathy decides that he and Mr. Browning must take turns in frequently completing walk-through observations as well as formal observations. These practices continue another two months before Mr. Blackwell suddenly files a grievance against Mr. Abernathy. As part of the grievance he states that he has rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution that are being denied and that if he does not receive a satisfactory response, he will take his case to court. He believes his academic freedom has been curtailed, that his freedom of speech is compromised, and that he has already been judged before Mr. Abernathy even had an opportunity to know him and his style of teaching. In other words, no due process is being given. In large part, Mr. Blackwell believes this is a case of racial discrimination. He knows of no other teacher who is being observed so frequently and considers the activities of the administration a form of harassment.

On receiving the grievance, Mr. Abernathy calls Ms. Bloomberg and explains the contents. He requests that he be able to work with the school attorney in responding to the allegations. He writes several questions for the attorney.

