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**CASE 7. A Vague Destination, No Compass or Map**

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Key Concepts: Team Leadership and the Role of the Principal as a Facilitator, Motivator, and Supporter

**The 2nd-Grade Team Meeting**

Charlene Anderson, the 2nd-grade team leader, stood next to the large easel pad, with marker in hand, and posed the question: "What are some of the typical reading struggles you might see your students having with a lesson you taught last week?"

The teachers around the table sat in silence while Charlene waited. She tried again. "Can we think of a specific example from the past week's lesson that might help us understand why some of our readers are having so much difficulty?"

Harriet Russo commented quickly, "Some of my students get through this text without any problems, and then there are plenty of others who seem to stumble on every word."

Jack Herman let out a loud sigh. "Yeah, it seems like we get more and more low-level students every year. What are they teaching in 1st grade, anyway?"

Charlene tried to press ahead. "Harriet, can you be a little more specific? For your students who struggle with this book, what types of patterns do you see?"

Harriet let out a heavy sigh. "I feel like I spend most of my time with Chris and the nonreaders, and the other students get hardly any attention from me at all."

Esther Cho, a second-year teacher and the youngest and newest member of the team, sat silently, while Jack looked out the window.

Charlene nodded her head and bit her lip. "Well," she said, "I was hoping we could come up with a list of some of the ways in which students were having difficulty with this book and develop some specific strategies to support them." The team continued to sit silently. She wasn't sure how to proceed. "Let me give you an example from my class."

For the remaining 20 minutes, Charlene explained how she worked with a girl in her class whose decoding skills had improved significantly over the past few months. Esther seemed to listen with some interest to her example but said nothing. Charlene could feel Harriet and Jack tune her out.

At the end of the meeting, Charlene suggested that over the next week, the teachers try to list specific reading problems from their students that they'd like to work on problem solving together. While the teachers all nodded their heads, Charlene could feel the skepticism from her veteran teammates as they gathered their things and returned to their classrooms. Another hour-long meeting had passed and little had been accomplished. Charlene herself was wondering whether these meetings were the best use of the team's time and whether she was the right person to lead the team. Jack approached her and said, "I know you mean well, but those kids need the reading specialist to pull them out. We're not equipped to handle these kinds of issues." Charlene sighed and felt helpless. She knew this was what the team believed, and at the same time she knew she was expected to convince them otherwise.

As she walked out into the hallway, she saw that Harriet's class had already moved into their reading groups, and Harriet was in a small group with Chris and the four other boys who made up her lowest reading group. Harriet was leaning forward and trying to listen to Chris, while the other boys distracted themselves with their pencils. These were the moments that Charlene needed to document, so that the team could begin coming up with concrete strategies to work with exactly these students, but her own class sat waiting for her. As Charlene stepped inside her classroom, she wondered what she could do that might move this team's work forward.

### **Inclusion at the Buckley School**

The Buckley School had a reputation in the community for strong discipline and rising test scores, even though two-thirds of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch and there was a growing number of nonnative speakers of English. Buckley had many veteran teachers and a charismatic, take-charge principal, Laura Shea, who was skilled in attracting community partners and grants as well as recruiting talented young teachers.

But a recent dip in the students' scores on the state reading test had marred Buckley's otherwise exemplary results, and Principal Shea was vocal in her insistence that the school take aggressive action to reverse the trend. With the new superintendent's emphasis on more in-class interventions, principals and teachers were being asked to "be creative" about making the best of a shrinking budget for reading specialists. Mrs. Shea felt strongly that investing more resources in early literacy would pay off with better test scores in later grades. "We

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want to do everything possible to make sure that by the 3rd grade, students feel like they are capable readers. In each class we can identify the students in need of the most support; we simply need to focus and deliver those supports as consistently as possible," she explained.

In late October, Mrs. Shea hired Marianne Bennett as an assistant principal, specifically because she had a strong background in early literacy and had many ideas about creating teacher-led teams that would look closely at student work and develop formative assessments to improve literacy instruction. When she was first introduced to the staff, Marianne caused some anxiety, using statements like "It shouldn't be your kids and my kids; they should all be our kids" and "Collaboration is the key to serving all children well." Charlene had heard these types of sentiments in the graduate program she had recently completed, and it was no wonder, since Ms. Bennett looked like she had just graduated from college. Charlene hadn't seen much evidence of those theories at Buckley; teachers and administrators were always preoccupied with raising test scores or dealing with budget cuts. "Great," Jack groaned under his breath. "Another Ivy League genius to look over our shoulders."

But when she bumped into Ms. Bennett in the hallway, Charlene mentioned her graduate training in reading and it turned out they had taken some of the same coursework on reading interventions. Charlene hoped that Ms. Bennett would bring resources and perspectives to support some of the teachers and students around literacy.

Later that week, when she was called into a meeting with Mrs. Shea and Ms. Bennett, Charlene's first thought was that she was being evaluated. Instead, Ms. Bennett surprised her. "We've received a small grant to expand the 2nd-grade team model so that teachers can work together to develop strategies and supports for our lowest-performing readers. We've received funding so that the entire 2nd-grade team will have an additional prep period each week to discuss best practices and ways to better implement interventions. Mrs. Shea and I felt that due to your background you would be the ideal person to lead the meetings and help your colleagues make sure they're doing everything possible for their lowest readers. You and I can conduct some classroom observations and give your colleagues feedback and suggestions. Of course, you would receive a stipend, and we would provide substitute coverage when you need to be working with other teachers or observing in classrooms. You would report to me to keep me in the loop."

Charlene felt overwhelmed by the offer, but she immediately saw the potential of working together as a team to improve reading

instruction. She had been frustrated in the past by teachers whose attitudes reflected low expectations for children who came into the 2nd grade with poor reading skills, but never felt like she could say anything. Now, she could actually offer help to her colleagues like Harriet—good, caring teachers who were feeling overwhelmed by the demand to help those students “catch up.” But she had concerns, too. She wasn’t the most veteran teacher on the team and she didn’t want to be seen as some kind of supervisor or someone who was telling other teachers how to run their classrooms. Charlene took the job, though, saying clearly, “I’m just a regular classroom teacher. Even though I have a master’s in teaching reading, I was hired as a 2nd-grade teacher, not a literacy specialist.” A few days later, she commented to a friend, “I decided to take the leadership role because I hoped that teamwork might offer teachers support in an environment where there’s a lot of pressure to get the scores up. I also felt like we could be doing a better job with our struggling readers and that sharing our experiences and resources might be one way to do that.”

### Checking In

A few weeks after she’d accepted the position, Charlene met with Ms. Bennett to discuss the progress on the 2nd-grade team. Charlene said to the assistant principal, “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing. I try to get the teachers to talk about students so we can problem solve, but a lot of times our conversations are for teachers to vent their frustration and complain about wanting more resources or to talk about planning school activities.” When it came to student progress, she reported, the team wanted the reading specialist to work with students in pull-out groups or someone from the district to come and test the children for learning disabilities.

Ms. Bennett asked, “What about classroom observations? Have you scheduled them?”

“I’ve tried,” Charlene admitted. “I’ve observed in Harriet’s room once, but none of the other teachers have set up their observations. I can tell that Jack is less willing to do it. He keeps suggesting that next week would be better.”

“Well, that’s an important part of your role, so be sure to get those scheduled,” Ms. Bennett said. They went over Charlene’s notes from the meeting and some of her plans for the next meeting. The teachers had some questions about when they could get information about the next round of formative assessments, and Ms. Bennett promised to get them the information. Charlene found herself struggling to report

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on the content of the meeting and didn't admit to Ms. Bennett the amount of time they had spent talking about the buses for next week's 2nd-grade trip to the Science Museum, and about last week, when they spent so much time discussing the reading books and bulletin board assignments. Throughout the meeting, Ms. Bennett was positive and encouraging, but Charlene left feeling more uncertain about her leadership and this team than she had felt when she walked into Ms. Bennett's office.

## The 2nd-Grade Team

Harriet was a 10-year veteran of the district and someone Mrs. Shea thought of as one of the top teachers in her school. She had deep knowledge of the community's literacy curriculum and taught it creatively and well. Harriet saw the work of the 2nd-grade team as important, but fundamentally she felt that the team was avoiding larger instructional issues. "I think if everyone taught the required curriculum, we would improve our student success," she admitted. "Not everyone on our team is teaching the district-adopted curriculum, which I think is the root of the problem. Some teachers seem to think that they can still teach whatever they want, but then we all are held accountable for the results. I like Charlene Anderson. She's been a good colleague to me, but I'm not sure if she has enough skill to lead this team. I have brought my concerns to Ms. Bennett numerous times about certain members of the 2nd-grade team, but it doesn't seem like much can be done about it." She let out a frustrated sigh. "I guess the best I can do is shut my door and teach."

Jack voiced his take on the team. "I know I'm a good teacher. I've been doing this for a long time and I've seen these programs and dozens like it come and go. I like Charlene, too. I think she's a lot more easygoing than some other people on our team, and I'd like to see her do well. I just don't need anyone looking over my shoulder. I'm not really looking for advice. I know I do some things differently than other people on the team, but I'm not telling them how to teach their students. Like I said, I've been doing this for 25 years now. I think I know how to teach 2nd grade."

Esther had her own thoughts about the team. "I came into this team of veteran teachers and clearly there was a dynamic here, long before me. I am doing my best to learn the curriculum and get my classroom in order, so anything that Charlene or other teachers want to share about how to do that, I welcome. But I'm not trying to get involved in any politics here. When I go to those meetings I feel like

there's a lot left unsaid, but I'm hardly in a position to rock the boat. I chat with Charlene sometimes and I know she has a lot of good ideas, but right now those meetings just seem like one more thing I'm adding to my already very long day. Honestly, I could use the time to be doing more lesson planning or communicating with parents."

Charlene was discouraged. "I'm not sure if it's this team, or if I'm not the right person to lead it. There are so many things we could be working on to improve, and I don't like the feeling that this is 'my' issue. I guess I was naïve to think that people would just enthusiastically jump on board and want to talk about their toughest students, but I'm not judging anyone. I want to help and provide more resources, which I thought everyone would want. As for classroom observations, I can't force anyone to do anything. I just don't think we can have real conversations unless we know what's happening in each other's classrooms. I guess I didn't know people would feel so protective. In general, I feel like I'm without a map. I wonder if Ms. Bennett should be running these meetings instead of me. Right now, I'm questioning the whole enterprise."

### Meeting Time

It was a Thursday afternoon, a few months after Charlene had been named team leader. The meeting began, and a few minutes later Ms. Bennett and Mrs. Shea entered the classroom. "I've heard good things from Ms. Bennett about what's happening with this 2nd-grade team, so I came to listen in for a few minutes," Mrs. Shea announced.

The teachers shifted in their seats somewhat uncomfortably. Charlene put on a smile and said, "Wonderful. We're glad you can join us. We've been talking about some of the data from last month's formative assessments and how we might use the information to form reading groups. I've been encouraging teachers to bring some examples of students progressing from one reading level to the next."

"Outstanding," nodded Mrs. Shea.

"Does anyone want to begin?" asked Charlene.

The team looked down at their papers but remained silent. Looking around, Mrs. Shea said, "Perhaps I should give you all some of the background on literacy instruction here at the Buckley School and why this topic is of particular interest to me."

Charlene felt a sudden sense of panic. As Mrs. Shea talked about the recent drop in reading scores and some of the current plans for reform in the district, Charlene wondered what would happen when

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she finished talking. She glanced over at Ms. Bennett, who offered her a tense smile.

Mrs. Shea was talking about how she felt confident that the experience on this team might result in some powerful problem solving. "I'll present what I've prepared for today," decided Charlene, "and if they all want to sit there in silence, at least Mrs. Shea and Ms. Bennett will see it's not my fault."

Charlene had already begun to frame her explanation of why she no longer wanted to continue as team leader. "Maybe some people just weren't meant to work together," she thought sadly. "I can't force people to talk if they don't want to, and if that's what it takes, they'll have to find someone else to do it."

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