

CASE STUDY 8.3

Diane News

Diane News sat at her desk watching the first gold and orange leaves falling onto the Talner Elementary School playground. “It’s time to take down the ‘Welcome Back to School’ display,” she thought. As she pulled a pad of paper toward her to begin sketching ideas for a new social studies bulletin board, she glanced around her room with pride. Diane had been teaching part-time for two years; this fifth-grade class in Littleton was her first full-time position. Her room reflected her love of the arts and her understanding of enrichment materials. A science table invited exploration. Books and magazines in a well-stocked library in the back could be checked out by her students. A bulletin board labeled “Where in the World?” contained a map and photographs. Originally, Diane brought in the photos for the display, but now her students were bringing in pictures, putting them up, and connecting them with yarn to places on the map. The room was bright and colorful. It looked like the kind of place where students could be active and involved learners.

Diane, 27 years old, was married and had recently completed a master’s program in arts and education. Prior to her current position, she taught at an alternative school in the district, where she helped to develop after-school enrichment programs for gifted and talented students. She had become interested in gifted education when she took a course on creativity, and she had taken several more courses in the area as part of her master’s program.

As Diane sketched ideas, she began to think about a more immediate problem. She was faced with an issue that she did not know how to resolve. On the surface, the situation appeared straightforward: She had to recommend no more than four students from her classroom for a new gifted and talented program (called “G&T” by everyone) for students in the second through sixth grades. Students were being chosen from each grade level since the program was in a start-up year. The students would be taken from classes to another school twice a week for half a day. Each grade-level teacher was asked to recommend no more than four students because class size would be limited. The G&T coordinator was urging each teacher to pick the maximum number of students, but no one was allowed to exceed four. Of her twenty-seven students, three were obvious choices, but her selection of the fourth was complicated by other factors. However, this decision was only part of Diane’s dilemma.

Diane had to choose the four students using criteria that she considered unacceptable. The district required a score at the 90th percentile or above on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) as the primary consideration for admission to the program. Class grades and group-administered IQ scores also had to be high. There was room for a brief personal evaluation of each student recommended by the teacher, but the form stated that this opinion was of less consequence than IQ and achievement-test scores and class grades.

Diane's standards for choosing students had little in common with those of the district. She felt that individual creativity in a variety of areas had to be evaluated when assessing children for placement in a gifted and talented program. For example, creativity in problem solving, choices of imagery in writing, and analytic thinking skills in a variety of subjects all needed to be considered. Diane also thought that some students who did not fit a standard profile and who met only some of the criteria often flourished in the challenge of such a program. She was troubled that she had to ignore these factors as she made decisions about her students.

In addition to having doubts about whether she would be able to make her recommendations according to the district's standards, Diane had other concerns about her decision. While in graduate school, she had taken a number of courses in women's studies. She had read enough in the field to know that girls scored lower than boys on standardized tests and that they were underrepresented in programs for the gifted and in other advanced courses, especially in math and science. Diane was aware that young girls were not sufficiently encouraged to participate in these programs. Yet she was considering recommending four boys.

The dissonance that this created in her was not helped by another recent event. The father of one of the students in her class had called to pressure Diane into including his daughter in the gifted program. Even now, Diane was furious as she recalled the conversation.

George James, a high school teacher and football coach in the district, had called the previous evening. James, who was black, had a reputation for being critical of other staff. Diane knew from other teachers that he was quick to call whenever he thought that they were not providing sufficient challenges for his daughter. When James called Diane, the conversation began calmly enough but escalated quickly to an unpleasant pitch.

"Hello, Mrs. News, this is George James, Margie's father. I've heard about the start-up of the G&T program, and I wanted to make sure that Margie will be included in it."

"Mr. James, I'm glad that you're so interested in Margie's progress, and . . ."

"Progress? I'm not calling about her progress. My daughter is smart enough to be in the program, and I intend to see that she gets there."

"Go on."

James was only too happy to continue. “I know she’s gifted, and she deserves a lot more than she’s been getting in your class. If she’s having any school problems, *you* have got to be the cause. How can you let her get away with such sloppy writing and careless spelling on her papers? Don’t you ever take time to look at the assignments these kids turn in? I have to go over every single thing she’s written in class—everything she’s done in there! What kind of teacher lets kids do such work? It’s not my job to be on her case every night, correcting her, seeing that she does her work neatly and properly. You should be setting those standards, and I’m warning you now, I’m giving you notice that I’m going to be watching your teaching very carefully. You have an obligation to teach my daughter well and to recommend her for G&T. If Margie isn’t in it, you better have some good reasons why a bright black girl was excluded.”

Diane hardly knew how to respond to George James’s tirade. She muttered something about the doorbell ringing and hung up. Diane was both upset and angry as she replaced the receiver. She felt that James had practically threatened her. And she was angry that he hadn’t given her a chance to tell him about the creative writing assignments she gave. They allowed for inventing spelling and sloppiness in early drafts so that students could concentrate first on the creative process of writing stories and poems.

But Diane recognized that she could not discuss certain aspects of Margie’s classroom performance with her father. How could she tell him that although Margie’s test scores were at the 91st percentile, the girl was what the literature called a “concrete thinker”? When class discussions veered away from straight recall of text material, Margie would not participate; slouching low in her seat, she would rest her head on her desk as if exhausted. Diane tried to encourage Margie to think more analytically, but her responses always remained at the level of concrete thought. She never brought new insights to the group. She did not seem to be a prime candidate for the G&T program.

The obvious choices were Mark Sullivan, Seth Cohen, and Josh Arnold, all of whom scored in the 99th percentile on the ITBS; they were the only three in the class to do so. Their daily homework and quiz grades were equally high, their classwork was consistently excellent, and they were lively participants in class projects and discussions. But all three were white and male.

Diane thought about the other student she wanted to recommend. Stuart Johnson’s offbeat humor and easygoing manner had won him many friends in the class. He was genuinely funny and could easily have become the class clown, but he never called out jokes or disrupted the class. Diane believed that he was truly gifted. She smiled as she remembered her original impressions of him.

Stuart was a 10-year-old slob. His lank, black hair was rarely combed. His clothes looked as if he dressed in the dark; everything was clean but rumpled and mismatched. Diane often had trouble reading Stuart’s scrawled hand-

writing, but once she could decipher it, she found that his work was consistently accurate. His creative writing seemed beyond his years, and he always completed the bonus critical-thinking questions she included on worksheets.

When Diane began a new topic, Stuart was the student who made insightful connections to related material. Last week Diane introduced the topic of Eskimos in Canada. Stuart was the one to notice the closeness of Alaska to Siberia and to speculate about the existence of an ice bridge between the two regions. Students enjoyed having Stuart in their group for class projects because he often provided a creative edge.

Stuart was new to the area, but he quickly became friends with Seth, Mark, and Josh. Diane would hear them cheerfully arguing with each other at lunch time, with Stuart often defending his more unusual views. His friends also loved challenging Stuart's math ability. Diane once overheard a problem the boys had given Stuart.

"C'mon, Stuart," said Josh. "You'll never get this one. What's 32 times 67—and no paper!"

Stuart paused for only a moment. "2144," he replied.

His friends quickly took out paper and pencils to check him.

"Tell us your trick," said Mark. "There's no way I can do that stuff in my head. Are you a pen pal of Blackstone or something?"

Stuart grinned and shook his head. "I don't know how I do it. I can just see the answers." The boys were then off arguing about some new topic, and Diane walked away, amazed.

While Stuart's skills were outstanding, his test scores didn't reflect his ability. Diane had checked Stuart's records from his former school. His grades were just above average, and he scored in the 88th percentile on the standardized achievement test. Even so, there was no question in Diane's mind that Stuart was gifted.

Diane decided to ask Bob Garrett, the principal, for advice. Garrett was in his first year as principal of Talner Elementary School. He had been a teacher in the district for several years and then an assistant principal. Diane was the first teacher he hired, and she knew that he liked her teaching style so far. He seemed to be the appropriate person to talk to about her concerns.

"Mr. Garrett, I'm in a bind. I received the district memo about the gifted and talented program, and the limits on four students per classroom sound absolute. But I have five possible candidates and several questions about two of them."

"Who are the five?" he asked.

"Well, Mark Sullivan, Seth Cohen, and Josh Arnold are clear choices because of their scores and class performance. The other two are Margie James and Stuart Johnson. Their scores are fairly close, but there are some other issues that concern me."

Mr. Garrett said, "If those two seem about equal, I'd say that you really need to consider the issue of racial balance. All our programs, and especially this one, need to reflect the diversity of our student population."

"I realize that," said Diane. "But they are both black."

Mr. Garrett looked puzzled. "Stuart? Really?"

Diane nodded. "I know. I met Stuart's dad when he came to a parent conference. He's black."

Garrett shook his head. "Look, Diane, you've got a tough problem. You're a good teacher, and I certainly trust your judgment. I'll back you up on your decision, but at this point I can't tell you whom to pick. You know the kids, so it's your call."

Diane appreciated the vote of confidence, but her meeting with the principal hadn't been much help. While her background and experience should have made the decision process an easy one, she was faced with a set of unfair criteria, an angry parent, and two students who were competing for one slot. Diane again turned her thoughts to Margie. Using district criteria only, Margie should be her choice. But Margie did not show the brilliance and thinking skills that Stuart displayed, skills that flourish in a gifted and talented program. However, Margie was a girl. Perhaps in a more intimate setting, Margie's skills might develop. So much of Diane's energy had gone into the study of women's issues. How could she choose four boys from her class? And it would look as if she had chosen four white students, since no one seemed to know that Stuart Johnson was black. George James would be furious. Diane had picked up his implication that she was a racist, but she was so angry at his demands that it was just one more unreasonable piece of her conversation with him.

"Why can't the district's standards be more flexible?" Diane thought. "Why must I choose only four students?" Diane stared at the five names on her list, wondering what to tell Mr. Garrett tomorrow.