First Rate

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Setting	
Worthington South Elementary (ages 5-11) in the United States	
Primary Characters	
Kelly Danvers: principal of Worthington South **Dan Sanderson:** fourth-grade teacher	**Sandra Evans:** parent of a student in Dan's class **Marcus:** Dan's former student

As she signed off on yet another teacher evaluation form, Kelly Danvers, principal of Worthington South Elementary, wished that she felt a greater sense of accomplishment. After all, being new to the district, she had spent the year getting to know the school community and building relationships with her teachers, staff, students, and parents. She believed that her evaluations showcased the knowledge she'd gained. However, she felt only unease looking at her final evaluation: Dan Sanderson's. The early-June sun streamed over the pages of observation notes from her visits to Dan's classroom that were spread across her desk.

Kelly recalled her first encounter with Dan, when she had interviewed at Worthington, a moderately sized K-5 school with three teachers at each grade. Smiling, Dan had shaken her hand firmly and introduced her to each student who filed past, many of whom gave him a high-five or hug. When she had started her new position in the fall, she'd soon noted that Dan had close relationships not only with his students but also with his colleagues. In faculty meetings, she heard teachers asking Dan's advice for speaking with certain families; having taught at the school for over a decade, he seemed to know everyone. She soon learned that his science curriculum was legendary. Kelly couldn't wait to get into his classroom to see his teaching in action.

Despite her eagerness, Kelly hadn't been able to observe Dan until February. There were so many new teachers at the school, many of whom were novice educators, that Kelly had found herself overwhelmed with evaluations and subsequent support. Given everything she knew about Dan, she had assumed her evaluation would be just a formality, and she had kept pushing it back.

However, Kelly's experience in Dan's classroom hadn't been what she expected. Dan's introduction to the day's literacy lesson had been engaging for students: they had all raised their hands to participate, and Dan had ensured every child got a chance to speak. But the students' enthusiasm for the preview activity had meant that Dan spent very little time on actual literacy instruction and never addressed the posted standard. Giving Dan the benefit of the doubt that it may have been an off day, she had given him fairly light feedback about pacing and committed to return for a second observation.

Unfortunately, the day-to-day responsibilities of her role had prevented Kelly from getting back into Dan's classroom until April. The second observation showed some improvement, but the lesson still lacked the grade-level appropriate rigor that Kelly was seeing in other classes at Worthington. At this

point Kelly had delivered stronger feedback, sharing her concerns that Dan was losing time for core instruction. She replayed the meeting in her head:

“Every year is important, but in fourth grade, students are really starting to read to learn,” she had told Dan. “They need lots of practice to develop their comprehension and fluency skills.”

“I let these activities go long because I love hearing all the students’ different ideas,” Dan had explained. “But I understand what you are saying about cutting into the lesson time. I do run out of time a lot.”

Kelly had continued: “Based on what I saw today, we also need to discuss your classroom management. I certainly don’t expect a totally silent class, but many students disrupted your instruction. You had to repeat yourself four different times while introducing the grammar game.”

“The students were asking good questions,” Dan had responded. “I would much rather have them hungry to know what comes next than just sitting quietly. It’s one way I know they’re engaged.”

“Their excitement was palpable. However…” Kelly had searched for the right words. “This is now two observations where I’m giving you the same feedback. Both times you had the opening activity extend to the point where you were unable to deliver the full lesson. You need to spend more time on core instruction. Especially literacy. I’m worried that I’ll have to rate you as ‘Developing’ overall in the year-end evaluation. That means I would have to put you on an Improvement Plan next year.”

Dan had bristled: “Improvement Plans are for bad teachers.” He had looked around his classroom, student artwork and writing covering the walls. “Do you really think I’m a bad teacher?”

Even now, Dan’s words echoed in Kelly’s head. Of course she didn’t think Dan was a bad teacher; she had reassured him of that in the moment and committed to completing a third observation to give him another chance. She had also looked up Dan’s evaluations from the past three years. In them, her predecessor praised Dan’s commitment to building classroom community, with a particular emphasis on his culturally-responsive practices; he scored Dan as “Proficient” in all categories, with only brief mentions of areas for improvement. Kelly couldn’t argue with anything the previous principal had written, though she wished that there was more documentation around Dan’s core instruction.

At her third observation, just last week, Kelly had seen that Dan was attempting to tighten his instruction, but the literacy lesson still did not address the intended standard. The district’s evaluation rubric was clear that the evidence she had seen should result in a rating of Developing, step two out of four – a score that teachers with Dan’s years of experience rarely earned. Veteran teachers were mostly in level three, comfortably Proficient.

Still, Developing did match some of the other evidence on Kelly’s desk. The reading assessment scores for Dan’s students were troubling. Some students who had started the year on grade level were slipping below expectation; those who had started behind were not making significant progress. Kelly expected that many of Dan’s students would struggle in 5th grade. And she prided herself on being a strong instructional leader. It felt almost unthinkable to score a teacher as Proficient when she believed his students weren’t progressing as they should. At the end of the day, students needed to be strong readers.

Using that logic, her choice seemed simple: use the rubric, apply the rating, and follow the policy. This course of action would be prudent for her first year in the district. When she’d been hired, the superintendent had stressed the importance of evaluation: “Your commitment to effective teacher evaluation makes you a good fit for Worthington. Your predecessor built a great community, but his evaluations were thin. We need to ensure that every teacher is doing their best for kids and receiving strong feedback.”

While she didn't know the superintendent well, she doubted that she could rely on leniency from him. Her first two years were provisional, and her contract could be terminated with minimal effort. If challenged, could she really justify rating Dan as Proficient despite his low reading scores? She hoped to remain in the district for many years to come—she could even imagine sending her own children to Worthington schools, once she had them.

At the same time, rating Dan as Developing felt wrong to Kelly. His commitment to building deep student relationships, ensuring that his resources represented the full range of identities in his class, and communicating thoughtfully with families were real strengths. Unfortunately, those areas of strength carried minimal weight on the actual rubric. Might she fudge the rubric a bit to honor the good work Dan was doing?

Additionally, Dan was showing some improvement, though not at the rate she'd hoped to see. He had been receptive to her feedback and made the effort to change; she worried an Improvement Plan might erode their positive relationship. While on paper Improvement Plans were intended to encourage growth, they often had the opposite impact. In Kelly's experience, the extra scrutiny required by the plan often pushed teachers to change schools; some veteran teachers opted to retire instead of dealing with the process. It was possible that Dan would look to leave Worthington.

Besides, while rating Dan as Proficient might cause problems with the superintendent, it would make Kelly's life as a principal easier—particularly as a principal new to the school. Given how Dan's colleagues respected him, she imagined that her credibility would suffer if other teachers learned she had put him on an Improvement Plan so quickly. The three teachers she had already rated as Developing were novice teachers struggling with both classroom management and pedagogy. Did Dan really belong in the same category? And of course Dan's previous evaluations by Kelly's predecessor had simply touched lightly on the issues she had observed without providing a Developing rating. But again, she was unsure that a superficial evaluation would hold up to the superintendent's new scrutiny.

Just before she was about to head to Dan's classroom, a new email pinged. It was titled "Concerns About Mr. Sanderson," and there were eleven other parents from Dan's class CCed on the message. Notably, Dan was not included. Kelly opened it and read:

> *Dear Principal Danvers,*
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> *I know it is late in the year, but I want to share my grave concerns about my son's experience in Mr. Sanderson's fourth grade class. Carl ended last year reading below grade level, and he has made no progress this year. He tells me that he reads a lot, but he doesn't seem to understand what he reads at all. When I spoke to Mr. Sanderson earlier this year he told me to "have faith in Carl" and that "many students struggle with reading." He assured me that everything would work out. It is not working out.*
>
> *While I know Carl loves coming to school and enjoys Mr. Sanderson's class, this is simply unacceptable. My son needs help, which your teacher has not provided to him. I have spoken with many other parents whose children have challenges and we all share these concerns. I'd like to set up a meeting to learn how you will address these issues with Mr. Sanderson. I also want your assurance that Carl's 5th grade teacher will be able to help him improve his reading.*
>
> *Sincerely,*
>
> *Sandra Evans*

Kelly sighed. She couldn't ignore this sort of feedback. Carl was already working with Ellen, the literacy specialist, but it seemed that he needed more day-to-day support from Dan in the classroom. The email made her think that her instinct to rate Dan as Developing was the correct one. Yet, as she made her way to her meeting with him, she held out hope that somehow their conversation would sway her in the other direction.

Kelly walked into Dan's classroom and found him prepared, with a collection of student work in front of him, including a series of habitat projects from Science. He greeted her with a smile.

"I know what we're here to talk about," he began, his tone serious but warm, "so let's jump right in. I want to share something with you, and then I'd love to show you what we've been working on during Science."

Dan opened by sharing a student essay from Marcus, a high school senior about to graduate. Marcus had interviewed Dan for his college application essay on "a person who had a positive impact on your life." Beaming, Dan shared the essay with Kelly, who found herself focusing on one particular paragraph:

> *Mr. Sanderson taught me to love reading. When I started his class I hated books. I only wanted to look at the pictures and ignored the words. When Mr. Sanderson read to us aloud and gave me Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut, I knew I could love to read. I compared my hairline to the boy in the book. He felt "magnificent" and "flawless," and so did I. It was only a picture book, but I saw myself. Mr. Sanderson gave me hope that school could be for me. I worked hard to keep that feeling close to my heart even when other teachers did not see me the way Mr. Sanderson did.*

Things had worked out well for Marcus, who would be attending the state university in the fall. And Dan had clearly supported Marcus's identity as a young Black boy in a way that was paying dividends long after the fourth grade. This was precisely the sort of teacher kids needed to persevere through school. At the same time, Kelly worried about Dan relying on picture books with his fourth graders. Was Marcus' story a prime example of a teacher meeting a student where he was—or of a teacher whose students weren't being challenged?

As Dan showed Kelly his students' in-progress habitat models and discussed what they were working on in Science, Kelly could recognize the students' understanding of water cycles in their work. Some students had used drawings, others had created diagrams, and others had used physical materials to show their learning.

"This is so compelling—thank you for sharing these with me. I definitely want to come see you teach Science. And what can you tell me about this student artwork?" Kelly turned to examine a series of student portraits that Dan had laid out across the desks.

"Well, last year we lost our art teacher due to budget cuts. The students were devastated, so I made sure to integrate art projects into our other work. Ms. Alvarez would always start the year with student portraits so that students could see their progress on the same assignment year over year. So this year I tried it out. I'm no art teacher, but I think they did great work. They all said their portraits were better than the ones they did last year. Hopefully they'll be able to hold on to some of their learning until they can take art classes again in middle school."

The portraits were impressive. Students had clearly taken time to individualize the assignment and had included items from home or points of interest. Some students showed themselves playing sports or music, or doing other activities. Many students had highlighted their heritage through the materials they used and the activities they represented. Dan explained that he had helped each student blend a custom paint color that matched the color of their skin.

And yet, none of these hands-on projects changed the fact that reading scores for Dan's students were among the lowest in the school and that she hadn't seen him teach an effective ELA lesson yet. Science and Art did not appear on fourth grade state testing, which was a substantial portion of how the school would be assessed. Much of the work Dan was doing with his students was remarkable, but the rubric didn't measure the aspects of teaching he did best. And the rubric was itself an indication of what the district believed made for good instruction—beliefs that Kelly shared. Was she really prepared to ignore those measures of quality teaching?

Looking across the student art display at Dan, Kelly knew it was time to discuss his evaluation. What should she say?

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