

No Margin for Error: Saving Our Schools from Borderline Teachers

by Mason Gary

A sample of the opening pages

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Preface

Dear Friend,

Thank you for buying this book. I hope it proves helpful to you. I wish this material had been available during my eighteen years as a public school administrator. But then, as now, marginal teachers were not a popular topic of discussion. This book was "born" as a result of my travels, conversations with parents, teachers and students, listening to administrators, and being on the "front lines" for nearly 25 years. It was also written to satisfy the requests of many within the education community. The contents evolved out of a national survey which I conducted with school administrators who attended my seminars dealing with helping teachers who were marginal because of poor training, personal problems, or negative attitudes. The response has been overwhelming, striking a chord with school administrators, teachers, parents and other educators across the country. Along the way, "No Margin for Error: Saving Our Schools from Borderline Teachers" has become the first national work to draw attention to the issue attracting the attention of the New York Times, the Chicago Sun Times, Orlando Sentinel, the Associated Press, the Gannett wire service and a number of television and radio outlets across the country.

The book has also invoked the wrath of teachers who maintain there are as many marginal administrators, school board members and professors as there are marginal teachers in our public schools. I do not take issue with their conclusion. That means it's up to those who are dissatisfied to inform those in leadership positions to make and carry out the necessary changes. Others maintain that the bottom line problem is that parents aren't parenting anymore, that we have a nation of "marginal parents" and the schools are assuming roles they are not prepared to assume, nor should they. While I agree the family breakdown is definitely affecting what goes on in the classroom, that fact makes it even more important that children have a good role model in their classroom teacher.

In all professions there are those who need attention from time to time in order to better themselves. One book cannot deal with all the issues confronting our schools right now. This

book is designed to provide proven practical methods for those responsible for dealing with, establishing and maintaining quality teaching in our schools. And those responsible include you, the reader.

Don Fuhr

September, 1995

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Acknowledgements

This work was generated out of the pride and gratitude we have for the thousands of effective students, often in the face of overwhelming odds.

We are grateful for the input received from front line educators across the country who offered solutions and direction in addressing one of education's greatest challenges: marginal teaching.

We appreciate the support from professional associations, specifically the American Association of School Administrators, National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National School Boards Association, who have invited us to speak at their conventions and write for their publications.

Our special thanks to Nathan Sargent who put the finishing touches on the format and design of the manuscript. Also, to Mrs. Susie Rhodes and Mrs. Jennifer Anderson who edited our work.

Our gratitude goes to Clemson University professor, Dr. William Bridges, who read the results of our research and compiled figures in an understandable way.

This is the second edition to No Margin For Error: Saving Our Schools from Borderline Teachers. I am grateful that Dr. Don Fuhr has allowed me to join him in this work. He has been my teacher, mentor and friend for over twenty-five years and I am blessed to know him and to be able to work with him. Thank you for your guidance, confidence, support and encouragement as I entered the ranks of administration twenty-four years ago in large part due to your influence. I am eternally grateful!

Mason Gary

January, 2015

"We have inadvertently designed a system in which being good at what you do as a teacher is not formally rewarded, while being poor at what you do is seldom corrected nor penalized."

Elliot Eisner

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Endorsements

"No Margin For Error is an excellent resource for educational leaders and those looking for

practical and detailed ways to improve teacher accountability. Dr. Fuhr and Dr. Gary have defined the problem - marginalism, and give practical steps leading to a remedy. This is a straightforward and practical book that give strategies to improve our teaching force and improve students learning."

Todd Whitaker

"Don Fuhr and Mason Gary are passionate about students having good teachers who provide quality instruction every day. They are committed to giving school administrators the tools they need to work with marginal teachers. Dr. Fuhr and Dr. Gary have demonstrated courage, over and over again, to holding both teachers and administrators accountable for providing quality experiences for students. This book is a reflection of their courage and passion."

Ray L. Wilson, Jr., Ph.D.

Executive Director

Western Piedmont Education Consortium

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Introduction

In our travels across the country we have witnessed a lot of schools doing things right. Most of these schools are working because individuals in each community have committed themselves to making certain they work. These are schools whose board members and volunteers know what's taking place in public education because they visit the schools; talk with teachers and administrators, and offer encouragement and support. Such schools are also working because accountable and trustworthy administrators create a positive and inspiring environment for the total staff.

Unfortunately, we have also seen the kinds of schools which provide credence to the negative conclusions drawn by education's most vocal critics. Just as there are sub-par hospitals, corporations, and governmental agencies, there are schools, across this country, which do need to improve.

One of the chief reasons so many of these schools are failing is the presence of teachers who lack the skills necessary to be effective in the classroom; or have negative attitudes which affect their students and their school. The existence of such teachers is no secret to students, parents, coworkers, or administrators. They do just enough to get by, which results in more bad days than good days in the classroom. Their performance borders on the level of incompetence.

Such teachers we call marginal. Many marginal teachers are permitted to drift in and out of our schools causing serious learning problems for our students. They basically "turn off" students to learning and school. Marginal teachers will pass evaluations required by the state; but flunk in the classroom. Without proper attention, such borderline performers can quickly erode the

support of colleagues and students at any school.

Most marginal teachers are not beyond redemption; however, to restore these teachers to levels of optimum effectiveness requires intervention. Unfortunately, few schools of higher education prepare school administrators for the challenges of remediating the marginal performer. Therefore, as administrators develop their instructional leadership skills, it is imperative to know what sound instruction looks like, to identify when it is marginal or not occurring, and then to have the courage to address the teachers not delivering it.

This book is written to provide guidelines and motivation to assist administrators, school board members, teachers, parents, and concerned citizens in their quests to save our schools from borderline performers. It may also be used by business personnel and civic leaders who are looking for practical and detailed ways to improve accountability in their local schools.

The education reform movement in this country is ignoring the most important force that drives reform: a solid teaching force. The issue of marginal performers is a delicate one. But it is an issue which must be confronted, if our schools are to meet the educational challenges of the coming century.

My support and encouragement to write about marginal teachers within our schools was generated throughout by my good friend and colleague, Greg Wilson. His ideas and suggestions kept me going. Through his travels and writings, plus his devoted interest to public education, the contents of this book were brought to the attention of media throughout the country, which I deeply appreciate.

Don Fuhr

"A poor surgeon hurts one person at a time.

A poor teacher hurts 130."

Ernest Boyer

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Chapter 1

Saving Our Schools from

Borderline Teachers

It is the missing link in education reform. And while much has been said and written about reform, it remains an issue which has received little attention: What are we doing to improve the quality of teaching in our schools?

Principals don't like to talk about the marginal or incompetent teacher, or admit that such teachers are in their schools. It makes the management team of a school look bad. Meanwhile, parents, students, and the effective teachers wonder why marginal teachers are allowed to

continue teaching without something being done to improve their skills. The trouble is, far too many school administrators direct their efforts toward maintaining status quo.

With more than 3.7 million public and private K-12 teachers, there are bound to be those who perform below any acceptable level of competence. Listen to this quote from the New York Times: "There are at least 'several hundred' incompetents now in the school system...Other observers think there are several thousands, while still others insist that 'several' would be nearer the mark. Whether these incompetents were unfit to teach at any time, or have been rendered unfit by the passing years, is a matter of opinion. The question is, why they are allowed to remain?" This was a quote from an issue of the New York Times in 1936! This suggests, therefore, competence of our teaching force has been a concern for nearly a century. More recently, national surveys and interviews of administrators and teachers have found that, in the average school, 10 to 15 percent of the teachers fall into this category. This translates into more than 370,000-550,000 teachers in our schools doing just enough to get by and leaving, year after year, students who are not prepared for; or have soured on future education.

The situation is not getting better. School administrators who recognize the problem rank the task of managing the marginal teacher as one of the toughest challenges in today's world of public education. The challenges exist for three reasons:

Some administrators were never trained to deal with the problem of the marginal performer.

Some administrators do not receive the kind of cooperation and support they need from others on their staff, or from their own bosses in the district office.

Some administrators are "conflict avoiders," reluctant to change the status quo or will use teachers' union contracts, tenure, or due process protections as an alibi.

The result of neglecting to deal with this issue is that marginal teachers are allowed to remain in their positions year after year causing frustration among students, parents, faculty, and administrators. As educators we have a fundamental crisis on our hands, which is either the inability of our administrators to accurately assess instructional performance or the lack of support, knowledge or courage to do so. We must end the practice of treating all teachers as if they perform the same. To do so demoralizes your best teachers and allows your marginal teachers to remain under the radar; hence, negatively affecting cohorts of students, year after year. Let us be clear, sound instruction must be the new normal. As administrators, we must be able to identify, support, and demand it. Hanushek found in Haycock's research gives us the reason to do so: "five years of instruction from an above-average teacher could eliminate the achievement gap on some state assessments." Schools are still under the accountability umbrella and we are assessed in a myriad of ways. To bridge this educational gap our students are experiencing will not be traversed solely through programs, curriculum, and the "how-to" systems we see each day. We believe the gap will be reduced or eliminated once we rid ourselves of marginal, substandard instruction. This is a tall order but one that can be attained if

we demand on-task teaching, bell to bell instruction, and mastery learning of standards that make students college, career, and citizen ready.

Marginal teaching creates a ripple effect throughout the school. Students don't learn, colleagues become ashamed and angry, parents become upset and the school, in general, suffers by failing to hold on to the support of the community. "In a knowledge-based economy that makes education more important than ever, teachers matter more than ever. School districts must begin to distinguish great from good, good from fair, and fair from poor. Effective teaching must be recognized; ineffective teaching must be addressed." (Weisberg et al.) We have found that a major obstacle for not addressing ineffective teaching is traditions or the mindset of "how things have always been done." These traditions are barriers and Richard Elmore refers to them as "the buffer." "The buffer prevents communities and school boards from knowing what or how well teachers teach, and from knowing how well (or if at all) leaders supervise instruction. In turn, the buffer ensures that building principals know very little about what teachers teach, or how well they teach. And yet these are the primary factors that affect everything dear to us: learning, and equal educational and life opportunities." As long as this buffer is in place, we will create status quo schools, teaching and learning environments, and our students will pay the ultimate sacrifice of a marginal education.

As Robert Eaker states, "the traditional school often functions as a collection of independent contractors united by a common parking lot." If teachers are left alone to teach what, how, and for how long, it is no wonder our students receive a status quo or below education. In the classes we teach, we often ask our students (practicing teachers) how often are you observed in the classroom, and the answers are staggering. Some reply "not at all" and usually the most observations are four a year. Wow! Before learning can occur we must do a great job teaching and, as an administrator, we are saying we don't even know what is going on in our classrooms if we rarely or never observe our teachers.

There is overwhelming evidence that poor teaching contributes to discipline problems in the classroom and student dropout rates. A number of studies indicate that vandalism is often linked directly to students' frustration over the conditions that exist in the marginal teachers' classrooms.

The bottom line is that no school can afford marginal teachers. The time has come for all involved in the education of our children to aggressively and collectively tackle the issue.

End of sample

Read the rest - the complete eBook is available at bibliobookstore.com