



If we wish to serve God and love our neighbor well, we must manifest our joy in the service we render to Him and them. Let us open wide our hearts. It is joy which invites us. *Press forward and fear nothing.*"

—Saint Katharine Drexel, Founder
Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament &
Over 60 Schools for African-American
and Native-American Students

> "Public School #1"

November 5, 2001 (Day 1 of 21)

High School: Nearly 2000 students; 97.9% African American, 0.1% Asian, 0.8% Latino, 1.0% White, 0.1% Other.¹

After tossing and turning all night, I was exhausted and leaning toward starting my illustrious career as a substitute teacher tomorrow, but the phone rang at exactly 6:30 a.m. I answered, only to hear a loud, annoying automated voice: "THIS IS THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA. We have an assignment for... Clayvon Harris. Please enter your PIN number using the telephone keypad..."

I scrambled out of bed searching for both my glasses and the stupid PIN. Luckily, both were nearby. Punching in the numbers, I waited expectantly for my first assignment: English as a Second Language (ESL) at a nearby middle school. *What?* I didn't sign up for ESL. I wasn't even sure what it meant. Would I have one class all day and be expected to teach English, Math, etc. to a bunch of kids who couldn't understand me? Or would I be rotating through English class after English class with several different bunches of kids who couldn't understand me? My Spanish is rusty at best. And Korean? Oh hell no.

Feeling somewhat cowardly, I declined, fell back into bed and back asleep until the phone rang again at 7:45 a.m.: "THIS IS THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA..." (really annoying). This time, for some elementary school downtown starting at 8:05 a.m. Even if I were dressed, I couldn't have gotten there on time. I'd need thirty minutes to get downtown, plus another ten to fifteen minutes to drive around lost. (I've never been able to find my way around Philly.) I turned this one down, too. But I was awake and realizing that my fear of not being called for assignments was completely unfounded. The phone rang again as I stepped out of the shower at 7:55 a.m. This time, the subject was

English at (for lack of a better code name) Public School #1—the high school I would have been assigned to if my mother hadn't sent me to private school. P.S. #1 was within walking distance, but it was worlds away from the small, private Catholic, racially diverse, all-girls school I attended. In the years between then and now (2001) P.S. #1's reputation as one of the most dangerous schools in Philadelphia had only grown. I couldn't help but feel a little excited. Here was my chance to see what high school could have been like for me.

Arriving at 8:15 a.m., with my sub handbook and poetry books in tow, I stood for a moment staring up at the imposing edifice of P.S. #1. I was intrigued by the large panels of brick-red paint and wondered what else they might be covering besides random graffiti. Hundreds of students poured toward the entrance, some loud and laughing, others more reserved, anxious—all submitting to bag checks and a pass through a metal detector. Identifying myself as a "guest teacher," I was waved around the metal detector, which struck me as odd because the security officer had absolutely no proof that a) I was who I said I was or b) that I wasn't toting an Uzi.

Inside was spacious and kind of nice; gorgeous murals and mosaics balanced worn fixtures and flooring; definitely not the hellhole I was expecting. I signed in at the office and waited for directions. They gave me a list of classes to cover and told me someone would bring the student lists and assignments later. (Still no request for the I.D. I stood in line for an hour to get.)

Here we go.

My first class was "Strategies for Success," a bogus title if ever I've heard one, with a bunch of 9th graders. Finding no assignment from the instructor and month-old notes on the blackboard did not quell my suspicions. The kids explained their daily routine: ten minutes of journal writing, then chatting amongst themselves for the rest of the period. There was no class list, so I had no idea if they were all there. What I did know was that they talked incessantly and complained because I made them a) move to the front of the class, b) quiet down, c) stop cursing and d) stop mocking their classmates and me. All in all, this was my best class.

The students swore they were behaving better than they normally did because their usual teacher was "too fat and too lazy to do anything." I, on the other hand, being the patient woman that I am, came very close to sending a girl covered head-to-toe in traditional Muslim clothing to the principal within the first ten minutes of class. I didn't understand why she couldn't be quiet. She didn't understand why she should have to. I threatened to kick her out. She stopped mouthing off.

It took me another ten minutes to get the rest of the class settled. Not completely quiet, but quieter. Somehow, I felt the poetry lesson I had planned would not be well received. Or maybe I doubted my ability to keep them quiet and focused. Whatever. I decided to flow with the "Strategies for Success" theme, asking them to introduce themselves and tell me if they were planning to go to college. This was a joke. Most refused to stand up. Almost all of them skipped the "is" in "My name is..." along with their last names:

"My name 'Malik.' I'm going to University of Maryland. I'm a play ball for the Terps."

Geez. How many black boys are deluded into thinking this is a legitimate option? If that wasn't bad enough, at least three of the students, as I was informed, "didn't talk at all...ever." (So what were they doing in this classroom?) To make up for them, I had an overabundance of L&Rs—Loud and Rowdy students who mock and loud-talk pretty much everyone, including me.

Most of the kids said they wanted to go to college to study law, business, accounting, basketball, etc. The young Muslim girl, however, told me her plans were to go to Afghanistan, stay with her cousin and help fight the Americans because "They started first." She sat back with a confrontational smirk on her face, waiting for my response.

I decided to take a pass. "I see your point," I said and moved on. Unfortunately, "Muslim Girl #2" also wanted to be a terrorist—or a muralist. She wasn't sure which. "Okay," I said and again moved on. Focusing on the non-terrorist options, I began my "you-can-do-anything-you-set-your-mind-to" speech, but "Muslim Girl #1" yelled out, "*That's a lie right there!*" I stopped short. There's encouragement and then there's full-on fantasy promotion. Might as well be real.

“You’re right,” I said. “That is a lie. But this is the truth. There will be things you can do and things you can’t do. And you won’t know which is which until you try.”

She sat back, glaring as the others nodded. I moved on, asking if they thought any of them would have impressed a prospective employer or admissions counselor with the way they introduced themselves. They were a little insulted, but a couple of the L&Rs took my question as a challenge and agreed to re-do the exercise, standing in front of the class—this time using verbs.

“Hi, my name is ‘Malik Jones’...” He continued, pretending to introduce himself to a scout for a Division 1 school. He did a nice job this time but I had to ask: “What if they don’t recruit you?”

“Then I’ll keep trying different schools until I get one of them to say ‘yes,’” he responded. Determination is a good thing. Having a great transcript to go along with that determination is better. I should have said that but I didn’t want to pick on him too much after he’d volunteered.

Muslim Girl #2, the terrorist/muralist, was also much better this time. She introduced herself to someone at an art program, then went on to share that she had been in an art program and had a mentor...when she was on probation.

“Then they tested my urine and I passed. So I got off probation. Then they kicked me out of the program.”

I stood there, uncertain of which thing I should be more disturbed by: that she was only in ninth grade and had already been on probation; or that when she was in trouble she had support and encouragement for her dream, but when she straightened up, they booted her out of the program. Where’s the safety net for these kids?

Turnabout is fair play, so they wanted to know about me. I hate public speaking of any kind. I broke into a little sweat just walking into the classroom. But I needed to get over it if I planned to teach. So I started talking.

I smiled and extended my hand to shake. “Hello, my name is Clayvon Harris and I wanted to write for television...”

“And you couldn’t, right?!” they yelled out.

When I told them I could and had, I finally had their complete attention. Even the L&Rs were shushing each other, as I gave a modified version of “the spiel” I developed for LA meet-and-greets:

“I grew up in this neighborhood, got good grades in school, went to Swarthmore College, worked in corporate America, went back to school to get a Master’s degree in Cinema-Television from the University of Southern California, and wound up writing for a couple of TV shows: *Star Trek–Voyager*, *Living Single* (they gasped), *Soul Food: The Series*, blah, blah.”

Suddenly, hands shot up. They politely asked questions, mostly about Queen Latifah (never underestimate the power of a rapper-turned-actor) and the other folks who starred in *Living Single*. I answered, hoping to steer the conversation back toward how working hard in school pays off. Unfortunately, before I could really drive the point home, the bell rang and the students broke for the door.

Advisory or what we used to call homeroom.

I rushed through the hallways weaving in and out of students, trying to locate a tenth-grade classroom. No one was there when I arrived. While I waited for someone, anyone, to show up, the “Section Coordinator” called. I told her it was my first day subbing and it was a little overwhelming.

“Only a little? That’s good.” She laughed...for quite some time, before telling me that someone would stop by to “get me up to speed.” She also mentioned something about checking on me later and hung up.

Soon after, a curt, middle-aged man in a bow tie showed up. He instructed me to take roll, gave me class lists and assignments for the remainder of the day, as well as a few hall passes, though he cautioned me to use them sparingly.

“I’m next door if you need help.”

“Why don’t we take roll first thing in the morning?”

“Because,” “Mr. Short & Sweet” answered, “we have to give our students a sporting chance.”

Advisory turned out to be a fifteen-minute piece of cake. So far, this teaching thing was alright.

This is not what I signed up for.

As the eleventh graders trickled in, it became immediately obvious that there would be many more Loud & Rowdies than in the ninth-grade class, and they would be even louder and rowdier. I couldn't have talked over them if I wanted. The students rolled past me, mostly late, some stopping to point out their names on the roll sheet. "Thas me." I was sort of stunned by the number of kids pouring in. I couldn't tell who had been checked off and who hadn't. I repeated over and over, "Please make sure I've checked you off." They weren't listening and couldn't have heard me if they were. After a while, I figured it was on them. They sprawled in their desks as if they were on the subway, grouped together in little informal chat clusters of five or six students. They didn't care about the roll sheet. They didn't care about the assignment. And they certainly didn't care about me.

I truly had a problem comprehending this situation. I went to private and Catholic schools—nursery through graduate school. I had never witnessed such blatant disrespect and disregard for an adult, particularly a teacher, in a school setting. I contemplated leaving, but then I thought, *some of these kids must want to learn something*. I approached them individually, asking if they were interested in the assignment of putting together a résumé. Most of them dismissed me without pause. The few that bothered to listen said they'd done the assignment already. And even if they hadn't, one girl informed me, "This is like a college class. You do your work or you don't. It's on you."

She stared at me blankly when I replied that it wasn't anything like a college class. "In college, you sit quietly taking notes while the professor lectures. If you don't believe me, go visit one."

Finally, one boy raised his hand and said he wanted to do some work. Maybe he felt sorry for me. Who cares? It was a start. I wound up working with a group of five. Most of them didn't have much to put down, so we pretended this was after college and they were trying to get their first serious job. The kid who got things rolling for me put down "going out," "talking to girls" and "getting money" as his hobbies. I made him erase "getting money" since it made him sound like a pimp when he was actually referring to his mother's generosity.

One of the kids surprised me. He was doing a *real, usable* résumé. He'd had quite a few jobs at restaurants, UPS, etc. When I encouraged him to put down

hobbies, he said he didn't have time for "all of that." He worked. A lot. I guess that's how he could afford the diamond stud earrings he was sporting. He also told me he was going to auto mechanic school (not thinking about it, *going*) and asked if mechanics made good money.

"Oh yeah," I said. "I've forked over enough money to them to know." He smiled and finished the assignment, references and all.

One of the girls had been a clerk in a state senator's office though she had no interest in politics. Bright and articulate, she explained that she wanted to be a lawyer.

"But look around," she said, referring to her classmates who were having what amounted to recess. "Coming from this school, I need all the help I can get."

Another kid finished up the format and asked if he could keep it. "My pops is looking for a job. I want to show this to him."

Toward the end of class, a few others belatedly copied the format I had put on the board and handed in slapped-together drafts. As they filed out, I asked one of the girls if this class was always so deafeningly noisy.

"Pretty much," she said. "But you had two classes in here because both of our teachers are out."

"Wow..." I thought, "way to take advantage of a sub."

Hall sweep?

All they had to do was watch a video and answer a few stupid extra-credit questions. Out of thirty something kids, only fifteen or sixteen students even bothered to show up. Only nine of them seemed remotely interested in learning something. The rest were rude, disrespectful and couldn't have cared less about *Othello*.

I was grateful for the nine who huddled around the VCR trying to watch the movie. One had even set it up for me. When I asked if he planned to go to college, he said, "Yes." When I asked where, he looked at me with a fatigue he shouldn't even be familiar with at his age.

"It doesn't matter," he said, cutting his eyes toward his clowning classmates. "Anywhere...out of state."

I spent half the class trying to keep six or seven students quiet so the others could watch a movie. We traded comments back and forth until they didn't have

good comebacks and shut up. I asked the last two L&Rs if they were interrupting the movie because they couldn't understand it. One kid, who told me his name was "Derrick," said he didn't see why he should waste time on Shakespeare. It didn't have anything to do with his life; he planned to get a job.

"How do you expect to get a job if you can't sit still and be quiet?"

"You don't have to be quiet at Pizza Hut," he explained.

Hard to argue with that logic, especially since he got up and walked out, along with four or five others. Finally, we were able to watch the movie in peace. I handed out extra credit, which most of them got to work on right away. Just for a few minutes, it seemed like a real class. Then, ten L&Rs including Derrick and his tall, skinny sidekick burst in with no notes, no excuses and snacks. They strutted around, joked, passed the chips, threw things (luckily not at me) and, basically, I lost control of the class.

As I headed toward the phone, they begged me not to call. I asked if they would behave. Some said, "Yes." Others jumped up on the desks and screamed. Needless to say, I dialed and seven students ran out. I don't know why they were rushing. It took forever to get an NTA (non-teaching assistant) on the phone and even longer for him to get there. I flipped on the overhead lights and waited by the door. (In case I had to run.) The students kind of chilled out at this point. Or, at least, took their seats—though there was still a lot of joking and yelling going on. Those who were watching the movie gave up because they couldn't hear it. They sat back in their seats disgusted.

Fifteen minutes later, when the NTA finally showed up, the students greeted him by name. "Yo Mr. So & So, wasssssup?" He looked around the room, then at me as if to say, "What's the problem?" It seemed pretty obvious to me, but I proceeded to explain that they had been throwing things, jumping on desks, eating unauthorized snacks. "Some of them ran out when I called you."

"They'll probably catch them in the next hall sweep," he said. (*Probably?*) Then, he walked over to a female student and whispered to her that her thong was showing. She pulled her shirt down over her jeans. Before leaving, he casually told the students to behave and told me to dial 100 for the school police next time. That's when it hit me: disrespect and disruption aren't a big deal. *Blood* would be a big deal.

The L&Rs huddled in the back of the room, laughing and talking, but keeping it to a dull roar. Seems no one wanted me to call the school police. The kid who had set up the VCR wound the tape back a little and asked if I could shut the lights back off. I flipped off the light and stood arms crossed, watching them and feeling each of the few remaining minutes of the period passing like hours. I was infuriated by their total disregard for me, someone who wanted to help. "Why bother?" I thought. As I struggled to come up with an answer, Derrick's six-foot-tall sidekick struck up a conversation.

"See now, why'd you call the office? You didn't have to do that," he said in a singsong voice.

"I think I did," I answered, not sure where this was headed.

"You're not going to report me, are you?" he went on. "Cause I didn't do anything."

Was he kidding? "You've been disruptive. You walked out. Didn't tell me where you were going..."

"I don't tell my regular teacher where I'm going. I, for damn sure, ain't telling no sub." He laughed. *I* was not amused and couldn't have reported him if I wanted to because I didn't know his name. I walked away. He followed.

"Sike... I'm sorry. I'm playing." He paused, grinning at me expectantly. "For real though, I don't need you getting me in trouble. I'm going to college." I just looked at him. "I am," he said. "I got good grades. You can ask."

"Please stop talking to me," I said flatly and walked away. Again he followed, sitting at a nearby desk. We had the same conversation three different times. During one of our exchanges, he actually handed in the extra credit work. I didn't believe it was his paper. So, he showed me his I.D. His name was "Naeem W." Who harasses someone, then flashes his I.D.? I suspected that this kid had some issues. Or, maybe, he was trying to threaten me and I was just too shell-shocked to realize it at the time. Finally, the period ended and Naeem and the rest of the students filed out, thank God. I was starting to feel weak.

I'm out.

A thirty-minute lunch break would not have been enough for me to regain my composure. I had *had* it. This situation was untenable. The kids wouldn't listen, didn't respect me and were hell-bent on giving me a hard time. I felt

like I was wasting my time and being humiliated as repayment for my trouble. I went in search of the Section Coordinator. I found her chitchatting with a student about a TV show. After five or so minutes, I interrupted, “Just wanted you to know, I’m leaving.” Suddenly, she had time for me. But realizing I was steadfast in my resolve to get the hell outta there, she insisted I had to speak to the principal before leaving. I gave her Derrick’s and Naeem’s names and made my way to the main office, where the principal was standing in the hallway waiting for me (in case I decided to sneak out, I guess). She politely but firmly told me I’d be leaving them in the lurch.

“We’ve got a lot of teachers out.”

Maybe she should have thought about that before doubling up one of my classes without warning me. I wasn’t feeling a lot of sympathy for her, but not being able to make it through my first day of subbing didn’t sit well with me. And what if this woman reported me? Would that jeopardize my future with the School District? Did I *want* a future with the School District? I felt coerced, more so by my own sense of duty than by the principal. When I agreed to stay, she thanked me and offered to cover the beginning of my class so I could grab something to eat. I only had ten minutes left and one of the guards had already warned me not to go into the cafeteria.

Since I was from the neighborhood, I knew where to get a quick bite. As I walked up the street away from the school, my anger turned to anguish. What planet do these kids live on? P.S. #1 is not the real world and they’ll be in shock when they find this out. They don’t have skills. They, “for damn sure,” don’t have knowledge. What do they have that somebody, anybody is not only waiting for but willing to pay them to have access to? Life can be hard when you’re well educated. These kids are being taught just enough to maintain the ranks of the underclass; to be cashiers, clerks, car-wash attendants and dishwashers. And that’s fine, if that’s what you want. But if not, you’re screwed. Suddenly, an image came to me—thousands upon thousands of black children drowned in an ocean of despair, lost to themselves and their communities. Tears stung my eyes. My heart ached. I felt overwhelmed and utterly powerless in the face of it all.

Trying to get a grip before going back in, I stumbled into a local fast-food spot and stood in line. I watched as the young guy behind the counter messed up

a customer’s order three times. “Two medium cokes, two large fries, a double-meat cheeseburger and a chicken sandwich, no mayo!” I wanted to scream at him. Instead, I shook my head. He probably went to P.S. #1.

Second chances are for suckers.

I was about five minutes late for the next class. The principal was standing in the hallway, chatting with Mr. Short & Sweet from next door. Squinting at me, he asked, “You okay?”

“No,” I said. “Didn’t you hear all that noise?”

“Didn’t seem any louder over here than usual,” he shrugged, shooting me a sympathetic look before returning to his class.

The principal offered to take roll for me. See who was missing. Most of the students still weren’t there but she didn’t wait any longer. She quickly and loudly rattled off names. If she didn’t hear an immediate “here” or “yo,” she marked them absent. I’m sure it helped that she knew a lot of them, but I had to admit, she definitely started off in a more authoritative manner than I had. She threatened to suspend anyone who gave me a hard time. They weren’t shaking in their boots, but they seemed to hear her.

Of course, as soon as she left, one of the students strolled to the VCR to pop in a *Def Comedy Jam* tape. When I explained that we would be watching *Othello*, he started to argue with me. “*Othello*,” I reiterated firmly, trying to mimic the principal’s tough stance. He seemed to be trying to decide whether or not to take me seriously when the Section Coordinator popped in.

“Sit down and shut up,” she yelled, then warned the rest not to give me any trouble. (I guess if you threaten to leave, you get some backup.)

After she left, most of the students settled down. There was still a lot of talking but at least it was about the movie. But really, how many times could they call Iago a “f***t?” They had mentioned something about “lowering expectations” in sub orientation, but how low is low enough? I wasn’t even sure why I was there anymore. I wasn’t teaching; I was barely interacting with the students and I was really okay with that. For most of the period, I stood at the back of the class watching. I felt so bad for these kids. Trapped in this substandard school, learning next to nothing, reinforcing each other’s ignorance

and bad behavior...and generally missing out on developing the skills they need to become productive citizens. It was a lot to take in.

At this point, most of them were behaving but, of course, there was one “particularly nasty young man” sitting in the corner, talking very loudly to a young lady. I asked him to be quiet.

He mouthed off: “What’s the problem? We’re just talkin’.”

I explained at least three or four times that he was disturbing the rest of the students. Eventually, the girl was so embarrassed, she moved away from him. So he had nothing else to do but watch the flick. I started to relax, even glanced at the movie for a few minutes, just in time to see Othello slap Desdemona. While most of the kids reacted strongly, the “Particularly Nasty Young Man” was the only one to do so favorably.

“Yeah, girls need to be smacked more!” he said, cutting his eyes toward me. I glared back, teetering between frustration and wanting to give him the finger.

The students lost interest after Othello killed himself. Luckily, the movie was almost over. Most of them had already answered the extra credit questions, so they were talking, passing pictures around, whatever. As long as they weren’t too loud, I didn’t care because class was almost over. Suddenly, one of the guys was trading punches with a girl. I shouted for them to stop, but he complained that she hit him first. Granted, she was a big girl, but this guy was at least six feet three and very solid. I was pretty sure he wasn’t hurt. I told them to stop or I’d report them. The girl giggled like an idiot as the guy claimed they were just joking. They separated and, thinking it was squashed, I turned to shut down the VCR. Next thing I knew, he had her pinned up against the door with the help of the Particularly Nasty Young Man. This time she wasn’t laughing.

I rushed over, stepping between them. I told the guy to let her go. He claimed she was holding *him*. She wasn’t. I looked him in the eye and firmly said, “*Let her go.*” He held my gaze for a few seconds, then let go. Really out of whatever sense of right and wrong he already possessed because truly, there wasn’t much I could have done beyond insisting. All three of them towered over me.

Begrudgingly, the Particularly Nasty Young Man snatched away, “*You just took the girl’s side!*”

“You had her pinned against the door,” I replied. “What did you expect?”

Just then, the PA speaker buzzed. The kids claimed it was the bell. I suspected it wasn’t, but didn’t care anymore. I wanted them gone just as much as they wanted to be gone. Probably more.

“Go,” I said, and they poured out. The two guys pushed roughly past the girl, almost knocking her down. She looked to me but what could I do, other than let her wait there until they disappeared down the hall?

Free at last.

I gathered my things...slowly. Next to the fourteen absences on the attendance sheet, I noted the names of the boys who had jacked the girl up against the door. I remembered them from roll call. I felt absolutely drained. How many times had I been called a bitch under someone’s breath? At one point, a kid had walked in to deliver hall passes asking, “Where the fuck’s the teacher?” He was embarrassed when the students pointed to me though not nearly as embarrassed as I was for him.

I made my way down the hall to turn in the attendance sheets and extra credit. On the way, I stepped in a puddle of yellow liquid, hoped it was Mountain Dew and kept walking. I just wanted out. When I reached the Section Coordinator’s office, she thanked me for staying, but had questions about the boys I reported earlier. Seems Derrick was absent and Naeem claimed I had him confused with another student. Even said he’d come by so I could look at his face.

“Get him over here,” I responded.

While we waited for Naeem, I acknowledged that perhaps I had the other guy’s name wrong but that’s what he told me. I described him in detail—up to and including the big silver medallion he wore around his neck.

“*Huge* medallion, right?” another teacher chimed in. He knew exactly who I was talking about.

Then, in walked Naeem. “That’s him,” I said without hesitation. He seemed surprised, even hurt. Maybe this boy really had been trying to intimidate me. Well, the chance of reprisal was slim because I will never *ever* set foot in P.S. #1 again.

“Naeem, you’re getting dumber and dumber each year. It was your idea to have her look you in the face,” the Coordinator smirked.

His response to all of this? “But I said I was sorry.”

“Three or four times,” I acknowledged. “All followed by, ‘For real though, I don’t need you getting me in trouble.’”

The Coordinator interrupted, “Did he get on your nerves?”

None of this struck me as appropriate, but I answered, “Yes.”

“That’s all that matters,” she said.

Naeem objected as a burly, male instructor escorted him to detention.

The teachers hanging out in the Coordinator’s office found this whole episode quite amusing. They had a huge belly laugh, then assured me the students I reported would be “dealt with.” Somehow, I didn’t believe an hour’s detention would be much of a deterrent for any of them.

As I stepped into the hallway, the Coordinator yelled after me, “Please come again!” I looked next door to see Naeem in detention, yukking it up with another student until he caught sight of me. His smile faded and his eyes narrowed.

“Come again?” I thought. “Not a snow ball’s chance.”

P.S. #1: PERCENTAGE OF 11th-GRADERS

SCORING BELOW BASIC:^{*2,3}

2000–2001



In March of 2002, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* published the “Report Card on the Schools,” which listed the 2000-2001 results (the year before I started subbing) of Pennsylvania’s Standardized Student Assessment (PSSA) for 5th, 8th and 11th graders throughout the state. Scores fell into four categories: Advanced, Proficient, Basic and the lowest category—*Below Basic*. I noted the results of the schools where I subbed and confirmed them on the state of PA’s Education website. They are listed at the end of each school’s chapter to demonstrate the dire academic situation we were facing in Philadelphia.

*Percentages are rounded.

> This May Have Been a Huge Mistake

Four months earlier...

After ten years of pursuing a career as a television writer, I had burned out on the feast or famine nature of Hollywood and ached to do something that would make an immediate impact. Teaching seemed like the perfect solution. Since public schools in Philadelphia were just as bad as those in Los Angeles, I decided to go home, where I discovered a school district on the verge of state takeover.

Rumor had it that a hundred-million-dollar deal had already been struck with Edison Schools, Inc., a private education management firm with a debatable track record. People were pissed off. The mayor was pissed. Parents were pissed. Civic groups came out of the woodwork. Some folks were angry because the deal seemed to be a fait accompli though the Commonwealth and the City were still “in discussions.” Others were angry because they didn’t have a shot at the lucrative contract. Many were convinced that a for-profit company would never put the education of the students before its bottom line. Still others were upset because there was so much opposition to a solution that had yet to be given a chance. The uproar seemed less about educating children and more about the spiraling costs of funding a system that is obviously broken.

Despite the raging debate, classes were about to start. And while requirements for a full-time faculty position were quite rigid (no PA state certification, no job), the School District was practically begging for substitute teachers because, according to one of the area experts who conducted my sub training, on any given day they have “5,000 or more absent teachers.” There are only around 12,500 teachers employed by the District. How could 5,000 teachers be absent in one day? If she was trying to shock me, she succeeded. I went to Catholic school—nursery through twelfth grade. Nuns show up to work. And lay teachers who work in Catholic schools are expected to follow suit. Apparently, in public school, absenteeism is not only tolerated, it’s anticipated. New subs are practically guaranteed daily work, as long as they’re willing to teach outside

of their comfort zone—academically, logistically and emotionally. That means a large chunk of educating the youth of this fair city is being left in the hands of—for lack of a better word—temps. Having worked as an administrative temp for eight months in Los Angeles while trying to break into sitcom writing, I can confidently say: temps don't know squat. What's more, they're not expected to know squat. If you can show up on time, accurately take a phone message and not get yourself or anyone else fired, you're considered *really* good. I hoped that wasn't the case with substitute teachers. Regardless, the School District needed help and I was eager to get started.

Follow the yellow-brick paper trail.

The application process itself took over two months. I filled out form after form, including a Criminal Record Check, a Child Abuse Clearance and an FBI fingerprint card that no one at the School District followed up on.

"But you should send it in anyway," I was told.

I nodded. After spending over \$250 for a physical, urinalysis and a chest X-ray ordered by the doctor because the tuberculosis skin test was "at best, inconclusive," I had no plans to pay for anything else that wasn't absolutely required.

Once all the paperwork was done, I was given an appointment along with fifty or sixty other would-be subs to fill out more paperwork. When asked to choose the subject area I wanted to teach, I proudly declared high-school English. It made sense. I majored in English literature in college. I have a master's degree from USC's Graduate Screenwriting Program. It was all right there in my transcripts.

"What else?" The woman reviewing my application asked.

"What else, what?" I responded.

"What other subjects can you teach?" she clarified.

I wasn't prepared for that question. Reportedly, kids are graduating unable to read and write. So shouldn't the School District be chomping at the bit for English teachers?

"We got a lot of English already," she added.

Being flexible, I offered, "Social Studies." I was runner up for the Social Studies award in high school. (I won the English award, but hey...)

"Um-hm. What about math?" she asked, unenthused.

"Do I look like I can teach math?" I wanted to ask. I think that's something you can tell about a person right away. Like if they're "not from around here" or they buy all of their clothes at The Gap. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.) The only thing I remember from high school math is how to calculate a percentage off at a sale. Or maybe my mother taught me that.

"No math," I said firmly.

She pressed on, "What about art?"

Art sounded like fun. "Sure...sure... I can try art."

Finally, she explained that I could choose up to four subject areas. The more I chose, the more assignments for which I'd be called. She suggested elementary for my fourth choice. I'm sure I must have had a blank expression on my face because she added, "You know, like fourth grade." As I continued to stare at her, she wrote "elementary" on my card. Sensing my hesitation, she pointed out that I could always turn down any assignments that made me uncomfortable. She smiled encouragingly and nodded for me to shove off.

At some point along the way, I was encouraged to sign up for the Literacy Intern program: a full-time teaching position, a full-time salary of \$32K per year (you heard me), benefits and a shared class assignment. I decided to pass. I wasn't ready to commit to going back to school to get certified. I decided to stick with subbing; make sure I actually liked teaching first. I was pretty sure I would. I love kids. I have fond memories of school. For a couple of summers, I was a teaching assistant in a summer program for kids and I had a ball. I couldn't wait to get started.

Dis-orientation.

Despite all of the paperwork, no doubt designed to give the School District a clear picture of its applicants, there was no formal interview process. Perhaps if there had been, someone might have noticed that the woman sitting across from me during orientation was just a tad...psycho. Not muttering-to-herself-out-loud (much) psycho, but definitely "off." She was absolutely incensed that I had signed up to teach both high school and (not my idea) elementary school.

"You have to choose one. Or, at least not sit over here with the rest of us, who aren't so greedy." She also claimed to have subbed before. How did that happen?

“Psycho Sub,” notwithstanding, I was enthusiastic about orientation. Unlike some, I was under no delusion that teaching would be an easy gig. In Los Angeles, subs are required to pass the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST), which isn’t difficult but does require some brushing up. After passing the CBEST and taking a full week’s worth of training classes, subs are given the go-ahead to start teaching. I decided to leave LA just as they called me for orientation. In Philly, orientation turned out to be a leisurely paced, five-hour session (including breaks and lunch) conducted by longtime employees of the School District. To their credit, they were well-versed in their topic areas. They casually went over classroom strategies and activities, lesson plans, employee benefits and HERBS (Human Resources Employee Record Base for Substitutes) the automated assignment system. You know...the loud recording... *“THIS IS THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA...”*

Given the brevity of time, our presenters stressed three things: 1) Have something for the kids to do; sometimes teachers don’t leave assignments. 2) Dial six on the classroom phone to get help. And 3) Keep an eye on the students. That last one seemed pretty obvious, but they explained that in the late nineties, two male students had raped a 13-year-old, female special ed. student at “Public School X,” *while* a substitute teacher was on duty. The sub claimed she didn’t realize anything was happening behind the portable chalkboard (another reason why people should be interviewed).

To be fair, most of the people I met were exceptionally nice and seemed very competent: a retired teacher who couldn’t maintain his standard of living on his pension; a flight attendant who initially wanted to supplement her schedule with subbing until 9/11 wiped out her job altogether; a finance guy who abandoned his high-paying position to become a special ed. teacher because he couldn’t take the stress of corporate America; a Ph.D. student from Temple who needed to supplement his student-teaching stipend and, of course, Psycho Sub.

While I felt confident in the abilities of the others, Psycho Sub worried me. It wasn’t just the crazy thing. A lot of very crazy people are highly productive. They have an incredible ability to focus/obsess. But Psycho Sub was a bit cavalier. For example: Though it may not be official District policy, teachers are not encouraged to intervene in fights between students. During a quickie group discussion on conflict resolution, I commented that I would find it hard to stand

by and let two kids beat the hell out of each other. I guess my comment struck Psycho Sub as particularly naïve. In fact, she said just that.

“You are *sooo naïve*.” She went on to suggest I carry a cell phone, call the police and stay out of the way if a fight breaks out.

“*That* will keep you out of the obituaries.” She nodded at me, wild-eyed and emphatic.

We exchanged a few more words. Exactly what I said, I don’t recall but I’m pretty certain the words “fine example” and “bully” slipped out of my mouth. She leaped up, motioning as if to jump on me. Luckily for one of us...probably me...a five-foot, sixty-year-old woman was able to hold her back.

Eventually, we were distracted by a significant piece of information: our salaries. The woman in charge of this section told us PA-certified substitutes are paid \$95 per day for the first twenty-one days of employment and \$115 per day thereafter. Out of the fifty or sixty people in the room, there were maybe two certified teachers. A few others were working toward it. Continuing, the woman apologized for having to tell us this, but the rest of us would be paid \$95 a day—once we completed our 22nd day of subbing. For the first twenty-one days, we’d be making \$40 a day; probably less than we’d make for a full day of work at McDonald’s. Some of us laughed; others grumbled. Psycho Sub was enraged.

“Something is wrong when they’re paying teachers forty bucks a day!” she declared before storming out.

“I’m with the crazy lady on this one,” I thought, but then quickly decided to view the first twenty-one days as an internship. After all, it’s about the kids, right? Besides, starting on day twenty-two, we’d graduate from welfare wages to those of the working poor.

With that, the ladies wished us well, told us we’d be “in the system” by Monday and sent us off with a three-hundred page, jerry-rigged handbook filled with photocopies of activities, teaching theories and numbers for nearly every educational office in Philadelphia proper. I found myself clutching that handbook as if my life depended on it.

> “Public School X”

October 29, 2001

Middle School: Over 800 students; 91.3% African American, 7.2% Asian, 1.1% Latino, 0.2% White, 0.1% Other.¹

B is for the bullet that wasn't meant for "Brian." Wary of starting my new job armed with little more than determination and my sub manual, I called on a family friend, who also happened to be the new principal of the infamous Public School "X." Given an opening, "Principal Williams" invited everyone to visit what he called "The New P.S. 'X'." I arrived at 8:30 a.m. sharp to find him embroiled in a crisis. One of his students, "Brian J.," had been killed over the weekend by a bullet that "... wasn't meant for him." I wound up accompanying Principal Williams from class to class as he broke the news of the fifth grader's death to teachers who, in turn, had to tell their students.

By the time we arrived at Brian's homeroom, his classmates already knew. Far from being hysterical, they seemed almost impassive. The staff, on the other hand, was a mess. "Miss Smith," one of the assistant principals, collapsed into the Principal's arms crying. He escorted her from the room while Brian's homeroom teacher turned away to privately grieve. Slowly, the kids began to lose their battle with stoicism. As they began to cry, they were quietly escorted from the room.

"Let them cry!" I wanted to shout, painfully aware of my status as a visitor and untested sub. The shaking shoulders and bowed heads were clear signs they needed to let it out. I couldn't understand why they were trying to be so brave. They weren't asking for help. They weren't reaching for hugs. They just sat there, wiping silent tears as some man droned on, explaining the stages of grief.

"Who is this idiot?" I thought. "He can't possibly be a real counselor. Does he realize these kids are in fifth grade?" In hindsight, I realized he was probably just

as much in shock as everyone else and didn't know what to say. Finally, a School District psychologist arrived and took over. Thank God. She told the kids it was okay to cry; okay to be sad. I don't know that they believed her. They still fought the tears. And when they lost the battle, they were still being ushered away. I guess that was the opportunity to put an arm around their shoulders and give them the hugs and reassurance they needed.

Teachers dropped by from all corners of the school to show their solidarity and support. When Principal Williams returned, he planted himself quietly but firmly in the middle of the room, as if to say, "I know we lost one but the rest of you, you're under my watch now. And for the time being, you are safe." The kids settled down and began to open up and talk about Brian. How he liked to tell jokes. How he could throw a basketball with one hand from center court and sink the shot. As I listened, thinking all the usual platitudes about a wasted life, the psychologist tried to assure the students that this was just a freak accident... that it wasn't Brian's fault or his parents' fault. It just happened.

A shoot-out in broad daylight on a Sunday afternoon? It was definitely somebody's fault. The gunman, definitely; the parents, maybe. There's always something on the news about parents who neglect their kids...then I heard the teachers whispering, expressing sympathy for the parents, who apparently were very involved with the school and their only child. They were the kind of parents who would pop by school in the middle of the day to check on him. Make sure he was okay and, even more importantly, to make sure he was getting his work done. Brian had transferred in from a charter school the previous year and he wasn't up to speed academically; so he had been held back. His parents were determined that this wouldn't happen again. Sadly, they'll never have the opportunity to see what he could have accomplished.

Suddenly, the conversation turned. Many of the twenty-something kids in the class began to share similar stories of "freak accidents," similar to their classmates':

"My brother got shot in the subway. And they pushed him onto the tracks..."

"My cousin got hit by a bullet..."

"My uncle..."