

“It takes a village to raise a child,” the old proverb says. And getting a child to college takes just that—everyone.

The Village is the families, the educators, the counselors, the youth workers, and the other community members within and beyond our schools—everybody who comprise the potential support system in a student’s life.

The Village is the external force that reflects or rejects what students think about themselves and their prospects for college and life well beyond it.

At its best, the Village reminds students that college is a crucial and collective venture; one that they do not have to navigate alone.

The Teacher
Ms. Henly



“On a systemic level, we really need to stop testing every child the same way.”

I had a student that I will never forget a few years ago. She wasn't a refugee, but she was an immigrant. She came here to live with her aunt and uncle, legally. Legally and on a learning visa, I believe. She's from Cambodia, and her parents were still in Cambodia. She told me that she misses them very much, and I remember just not being able to respond to such a situation. I admired her for going all these lengths for her education. There was a certain respect for her audacity, for her risk.

She had a very limited English proficiency, but because of the way the English as a Second Language program works, you really don't have to have that good of an English proficiency to get out of ESL-only classes and come into the general classroom setting. So despite her very limited English proficiency, she had been integrated into my general English classroom setting and was expected to perform at the same level as all of my native English speakers.

According to how our standardized testing situation is set up in the United States, we test everybody the same. The philosophy is a good one, ideologically. Everybody has the same capability of learning. We need to push everyone and hold everyone to the same standards, so we're going to test everyone the exact same. The downside of that philosophy is when the true equity and equality of the situation is measured, does every student really have the same chance? See, the idea of equity is that everyone gets the same thing. This is what we are doing right now by designing our testing system to be as uniform as possible. But really, we should be looking at equality, which is giving everyone what they need individually to succeed. This story really drove that home for me as a teacher. This is what made me change my mind:

It was my first year of teaching with her. Luckily I had known her from my student teaching. She had been in my student-teaching classroom the year prior, and she got to move up with me when I was hired here after that. That was really special; we had already formed a good relationship. So we worked really closely together from the get go, her senior year, and she was one of the most motivated students I've ever had.

It was clear to me that she wanted to succeed here, in the United States, and contribute to our community, make herself better, and support her family back in Cambodia. One of my favorite things about her is that she was grateful for the opportunity her aunt and uncle gave to her. She would always mention wanting to be successful so that she could repay them, in some way, later. I just thought that was really incredible about her. The way that manifested is that she was just constantly wanting extra help. She wanted to stay after school with me. She tried to take every single opportunity that I gave her.

As a teacher, I was working extra hours to try to help her. Her biggest struggle was the ACT. Her math score, I think, was in the upper twenties, maybe even thirties. Clearly this girl had some incredible academic ability. Her English score was a ten or eight. I mean it was really, really low because she was not a native English speaker. And we did everything that we could that year: she stayed after, we did practice tests, special lessons. I would use her own writing from class, and we would go back through to work on grammar rules. I would try to relate that to the test. I told her things like, "You'll see this rule on the ACT. It's been on there in the past, so we need to remember this one." What was remarkable was that I saw her improving in my class. She was performing better on tests, and her classwork was so much better than where she started. But she still wasn't improving on the ACT, which is funny because that test is supposed to reflect academic knowledge. If they're growing in the classroom, they should also, theoretically, if it's a good test, be growing on the test too.

It wasn't just grades either. The good thing about having the school's block schedule is that I get to see my students throughout the entire year. What I noticed specifically about her was her writing ability. Writing to me is one of the biggest reflections of a student's ability to succeed in college. Writing and reading. I was observing her in-class

writing abilities and her interpretive abilities. She wouldn't sit in the corner with a look of utter confusion. She began reading passages aloud to the class. She was leading discussions.

But her ACT scores were completely stagnant in English and reading. So I couldn't figure out why that was. I didn't understand at the time because I hadn't done a whole lot of research on the ACT. Now that I have, I do understand.

I look back on this moment that I'm about to tell you about again, and I completely get it. She had stayed after school that day. The December exam, the seniors' last chance to get the score they want, was approaching. She needed to be accepted into college without having to do a bunch of remedial courses. It costs money, and of course, as an immigrant, she didn't have money. She was low income, barely feeding herself, and in no condition to spend hundreds and hundreds of extra dollars on taking the remedial classes in college. From what I saw, she didn't need to. She had the work ethic. She would have figured out how to succeed without the remedial classes just like she was succeeding tremendously in my own class.

We were staying after school on a regular basis, and one day, I was trying to build her confidence. I went into this day thinking, *I've found the easiest passage I could find*. I spent an hour and a half looking through all my ACT prep books that I had gathered, and I tried to find the easiest one with the easiest questions. I wanted her to think to herself, "Oh, you can do this! Look at all you've learned." Once she saw a good score on one passage, maybe that would ease her anxiety, which has also been shown to have an effect on test scores, and do better.

The passage I found was about a grizzly bear, and it was a really straightforward passage. So I thought, *It is just about grizzly bears and their habitat. This is the most simple natural science reading passage*. I had her read it out loud to me because I was checking for her decoding skills. If you can't decode, then you can't comprehend. She read the passage out loud to me, and she read it perfectly. Not a single mistake. I starting thinking, *Yes, this is finally going to happen*. Then she went to answer the questions, and I stayed excited. She was doing everything right, and she even stayed within the time

limit and answered all the questions before time ran out. When I went to check them, I was so thrilled.

And she got all of the questions wrong—all of them.

I remember being so devastated. I didn't want to tell her her score after all the work we had put in, and it was on what I thought had been like the easiest passage that I could find. She gets them all wrong. I'm about to destroy this girl's confidence—my worst fear as a teacher. Once you do that, you create a learned helplessness that can spiral. I didn't end up telling her her exact score. I did communicate that it wasn't where we wanted to be, but I asked her a few questions. I wanted her feedback. *What did she not understand? What happened? How could I help her?*

Her response was, "Ms. Henly, what in the world is a grizzly bear?"

And that's when I realized that she had absolutely no cultural context for what she was reading about in that passage. When the test was asking about the author's purpose, or the author's choices to develop purpose, or organization, she had nothing in her background knowledge to give her any context to answer those questions or to understand this passage at all. One of the best reading intervention strategies is to visualize what you read, and if you can't do that, you don't understand it. We have people going into these standardized tests who have no cultural context what the passage is even about.

It wasn't her lack of knowledge for purpose or rhetorical analysis. No, absolutely not. It had nothing to do with her ability to execute the skills. It just happened to be that luck of the draw that she was reading about something that she couldn't visualize because she had no personal experience with that at all. Never even once. I think that's one of the big downfalls of standardized tests. No matter how hard we try, as long as we continue to test every child the exact same way, you cannot avoid situations like that.

One of the things that's excellent about college is that it's a collaborative learning environment. No matter where you go—public, private, community—it is collaborative. You have seminars, and you discuss, and you help each other figure things out. It is just

like when we go out into the real world and have to figure problems out in our society. If she had run into this passage in college, and she was going to be tested over it, she would have had the opportunity to self advocate and ask for help. She would have had peers to run ideas by, and she would have been able to go to office hours to get extra help. And she was the student who was always doing that in my class. She was always staying after school with me trying to get better and figure stuff out, and it had paid off. She was ready for college.

I think that on a systemic level, we really need to stop testing every child the same way. When we are looking at the success and failure of our education system, we cannot see them as a lump of scores, but as different groups. One of them could be English language learners. You could look at their growth instead of a one-time score. Getting rid of standardized tests is not an option. We might need to consider that, but on a systemic level, we might consider looking at teacher input. This includes letters of recommendation to evaluate growth. This requires a community attitude shift toward teachers. That is one of the things that I feel constantly as a teacher.

The teacher evaluation system puts so much emphasis on test scores, and I feel very untrusted. I have to be checked all the time to make sure I'm doing my job when I would be doing a much better job if I didn't have to spend so much time doing that. Luckily in Kentucky, teachers aren't graded on test scores. But at the end of the day, if I were to be compared to other teachers that teach to a different population than I do in the same course, I might look like I'm not a very good teacher. This wouldn't be because of my skills but just because of the pure different situations that we are teaching in. If I'm being compared to a teacher who's teaching in an affluent community with people who are native English speakers, people that have always come from a place of privilege, and then you compare it to a teacher who teaches a very diverse population with all kinds of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, our scores are going to look very different. They are not a reflection of knowledge, they are a reflection of where you've come from. This is the unaccounted tragedy.

COLLEGE TRIPWIRES

READY OR NOT

Stories from the Students Behind the Statistics



With a Foreword from

Dr. Vicki Phillips

© 2017 Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the Prichard Committee except in brief quotations or other fair use under US copyright law.

The names of students and others in this book have been changed to protect their privacy, except for Student Voice Team members Rainesford Staufford and Kevin Short, the Grissom Scholars, and Neomia Hagans, with their consent or, for minors, their parent's consent. The views expressed in this publication not written by the Student Voice Team or its Editors are those of the original author and do not necessarily represent those of the Prichard Committee or the Student Voice Team.

Second Printing October 2017
Paperback

ISBN 978-0-9677756-0-9 (Paperback)
ISBN 978-0-9677756-1-6 (Ebook)
ISBN 978-0-9677756-2-3 (Facilitator Edition)

Published by the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence
271 W. Short St., Suite 202
Lexington, KY 40507

Printed in the USA

Contact the Student Voice Team about discounts for bulk orders at studentvoiceteam@prichardcommittee.org

Book & cover design by Hiatt Allen

Front & back cover photo by Andrew Krech, Associated Press, used with permission.
All other back cover photos by the Student Voice Team.

The text of this book is set in Crimson Roman, a font by Sebastian Kosch. The headings of this book are set in Muli Light, a font by Vernon Adams. The title of this book is set in Montserrat Medium, a font by Julieta Ulanovsky. All fonts have an Open Font License.

State Farm Youth Advisory Board and Lumina Foundation logos used with permission. The views expressed in this publication are those of the Student Voice Team or the original author and do not necessarily represent those of the State Farm Youth Advisory Board, including its officers or employees, or the Lumina Foundation, including its officers or employees.

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data

Names: Student Voice Team, author. | Phillips, Vicki, foreword author.

Title: Ready or not: stories from the students behind the statistics / Student Voice Team; foreword by Phillips, Vicki.

Description: Includes bibliographical references. | Lexington, KY: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, 2017.

Identifiers: ISBN 978-0-9677756-0-9 | LCCN 2017947371

Subjects: LCSH College preparation programs—United States—Kentucky—Case studies. | Academic achievement—United States—Kentucky. | College attendance—United States—Kentucky. | Education—Aims and objectives—United States. | Educational equalization. | Education, Higher—United States. | Universities and colleges. | BISAC EDUCATION/ Educational Policy & Reform/General | EDUCATION/Higher

Classification: LCC LC213.2.S78 2017 | DDC 378.1/61—dc23