

The Scandal at Pebble Elementary

Ms. Stewart, our best fourth grade teacher, rushed to my office at Pebble Elementary School in the Bronx and stood in the doorway, a disturbed look on her face. “Ms. Zimmerman, I need to tell you something very important.”

The last time I saw her like this was four years ago when she learned that one of her student’s and the girl’s family had perished in their apartment. I looked up from my computer and gave Ms. Stewart my full attention. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Several of my students just told me that Ms. Raymond tried to get them to change their answers on the math test.”

I opened my desk drawer and took out the binder where I keep notes of conversations with staff and turned to a blank page. “Please sit down,” I said, motioning to a chair opposite me at my desk. “Tell me everything.”

“This morning when I went to my classroom, Ms. Raymond was there. I didn’t know why the other assistant principal was there. She told me that the principal had told her to oversee my students while they took the state math test. He’d also put in that teacher’s aide who always falls asleep as the second proctor. Got me out of my classroom by having me write answers for a student with a broken arm in Ms. Smith’s class. As you know, students usually test with their classroom teachers whenever possible because this helps reduce their anxiety, so I found my removal highly unusual, but I obliged, nonetheless.

“When the test was over and I returned to my room, my students were out of control, frantic to speak to me. Everyone began talking at once,” Ms. Stewart said, clicking the retractable pen in her hand. “I passed out paper and told them to write down what happened. If

they didn't see anything, I said to write that. I wanted to hear from every student. In the meantime, I interviewed four of my most responsible students, one at a time, outside my classroom."

I stopped writing and looked up at Ms. Stewart. "What did your students say?"

"Mohamed said Ms. Raymond told him to change question number four to C," she said, pushing away her blonde shoulder-length hair from her face and reading from the notes on her yellow legal pad. "He said he didn't do it because he knew his answer was correct. He said Ms. Raymond returned to his desk a few minutes later and again checked his answers. She pointed to additional answers and told him to change them, too."

"Did Mohamed say Ms. Raymond told him which answers to bubble in?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "She did."

"What did Mohamed do?" I asked, turning the page in my binder, and continuing to write.

"Mohamed told me he didn't listen to her because he had checked his answers and knew they were correct. He's an excellent math student. Always gets at least a ninety-five percent on all my classroom tests," she said, proudly, as if he were her own son.

"Who else did you talk to?"

"I spoke to Samantha. This child is very smart, but she lacks confidence in her abilities. She said Ms. Raymond stopped in the aisle between her desk and Miguel's, looked back and forth at both their answer sheets and pointed out three answers she said Samantha should change." Ms. Stewart looked down and checked her notes. "Samantha said she was uncomfortable with Ms. Raymond's help and re-checked her answers but didn't change them." When Ms. Stewart looked up at me, I could see the pain for her students in her bright blue eyes.

“Can you believe this? she asked.

“Did you speak to Miguel?”

“I did.” Ms. Stewart began to laugh. “I’m sorry, Ms. Zimmerman, but I found Miguel’s response quite amusing. He said he began to solve a problem in front of Ms. Raymond and explained his thinking, step-by-step. Ms. Raymond interrupted him and announced to the class that she hears talking, then reminded them that they’re in the middle of an examination and there should be absolute silence. Then Miguel resumed his verbal explanation, and Ms. Raymond put her finger to her lips to silence him.”

When Ms. Stewart finished, I shook my head. “As you know, this is quite serious. You’ve just brought an allegation of cheating against an assistant principal,” I said, standing up, trying to hide how upset I was, and walking her to the door. “Please leave the statements with me. I want to read all of them. I’ll speak to the teacher’s aide and get her testimony, too. Thanks for reporting this to me.”

After Ms. Stewart left, I reflected on what I had just heard. *I don’t believe it! Cheating on a standardized test. This has never happened at Pebble Elementary before. There’s obviously no limit to what this assistant principal will do to see that our students score well. Now I know why the students at her former school were known for getting high scores on the state exams. Thank God Ms. Stewart has a conscience.*

A few minutes later, the teachers’ union representative came in. I’ve known her for over fifteen years, when she was the union rep at my former school. Not only is she an excellent teacher and highly trustworthy, but she’s got a big heart, and advocates for the teachers and aides. She looked at me from behind her round tortoiseshell glasses, and I could tell from her

facial expression that she was concerned about what she had to say. I watched her sit down in the chair in the corner, lean her head back and rest it against the wall.

“Ms. Stewart,” she said, “just told me what happened in her classroom during the math test. Wanted to know if she is going to be in trouble for reporting the incident to you. She’s worried about retaliation from the principal. I tried to reassure her that she did absolutely nothing wrong. Told her she followed protocol. You’re her assistant principal.”

“Well, we know Mr. Antonio’s going to be outraged that his name and school will now be under investigation,” I said.

“Since none of us are on the in with him, when he finds out we’re not letting this cheating allegation go away, I’m sure he’ll try to make our lives difficult,” the rep said. She reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out a bottle of water, unscrewed the cap and took a few sips. “I just got off the phone with the teachers’ union district representative. Said she’d inform the superintendent. He’s probably spoken to Mr. Antonio by now.”

No more Mr. Golden Boy.

“Now what?” the rep asked.

“I’ll report the incident to the testing coordinator at the district. She’ll either tell Mr. Antonio to do an internal investigation, or she’ll report the incident to the Office of Special Investigations at the Department of Education, and they’ll investigate. But first, I must inform the principal. I’m going to his office now.”

As I walked down the stairs, Mr. Antonio came charging up with Ms. Raymond behind him. We nearly collided.

“Let’s go to my office, Ms. Zimmerman,” he said, turning around and touching

Ms. Raymond on her forearm. "I'll catch up with you later," he said and continued down the stairs with me following close behind.

When we entered his office, Mr. Antonio firmly slammed the door behind me as if he were closing the cell door on a prisoner. He removed his grey suit jacket, loosened his tie, and rolled up his shirt sleeves. Then he sat down behind his desk and motioned for me to take a seat. He looked into my eyes, hard and cold.

"I heard you and Ms. Stewart spoke," he said. "I talked to her, too. The incident ends here. Are we clear?"

"You know I'm obligated to inform the district testing coordinator of any alleged improprieties."

Mr. Antonio sat up tall, elbows on his desk, hands clasped together hiding his mouth, and glared at me. "Maybe you didn't hear me the first time? I am the principal. I said, do not call the district. Ms. Raymond said she didn't tell the students to change their answers, and she doesn't know why they made up those lies." He stood up, walked around his desk to the door and opened it. "We're done."

When I returned to my office, I put a "Do Not Disturb" sign on my door. Then I sat in my chair and closed my eyes. *This is huge. Why did the superintendent bring Mr. Antonio to this district? He has no experience in administration and only one year of teaching kindergarten. Wants Pebble Elementary to become a showcase school but has no idea how to make this happen, except through unethical means. Does the superintendent know this? Is he planning to coach him in every aspect of running a school?*

A few minutes later, I got up, walked to the bookcase at the back of my office and

distractedly rearranged the framed pictures of my husband and children. *Mr. Antonio's only been at Pebble Elementary for four months and he's already ingratiated himself with various groups from the school body. Got a lot of people to like him. Probably thinks if they like him, they'll do whatever he wants. They don't know what really goes on here. Have no idea how he's segregated the staff and the administration into the "in" and "out" groups. Ugh.*

Later that afternoon, after dismissal, Ms. Stewart and the teachers' union rep returned to my office to report that Mr. Antonio had spoken to Ms. Stewart's class. "He told them he heard about what they said happened during the math exam," Ms. Stewart said, reaching for the **squishy** ball on my desk. She squeezed it a few times. "He told them that sometimes people make up stories to get others in trouble because they're mad at them for something. Reminded my students that Ms. Raymond recently gave many of them detention, and she had spoken to some of their parents because of the fights and bullying during recess. Told them that the things they said about Ms. Raymond could get her into serious trouble." Ms. Stewart took a deep breath and continued: "He tried to suggest that the students didn't really see what they claimed they saw."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Mr. Antonio said he thinks it's likely that Ms. Raymond pointed to their answers because she was trying to let them know that they skipped a question or bubbled in two answer choices for the same question." She paused. "Of course, he shouldn't have done that, either."

At that moment, the rep stood up and hit the dome-shaped gadget on my desk. The robotic voice blurted out, 'that was stupid.' She hit it again. Ms. Stewart and I laughed, and Ms.

Stewart continued: “Mr. Antonio told the students he knows that no one wants to see Ms. Raymond lose her job. Asked them to rewrite their statements and make sure to write the truth.” Ms. Stewart got up and started pacing. “It infuriates me how he tried to blame my students, to make them feel guilty for being responsible.”

“I understand completely,” I said, feeling sick at the wrongness of this. “I shouldn’t be saying this to either of you about a fellow administrator,” I said, looking first to Ms. Stewart and then to the rep, “but what he did was inappropriate, totally unethical. I’m sure he and Ms. Raymond discussed that if he put her in your classroom, allegedly to oversee the test-taking, she could give students the correct answers. Figured if she could get a whole class of high scores, the percentage of top scores for the fourth grade would increase and his school would look good.”

“I’m thinking the same thing,” the rep said. “Afterall, the state looks at the fourth-grade scores to determine a school’s status.” She stood up, took a cup, and helped herself to some water from my cooler. “I wish this was stronger,” she laughed. When she sat down again, she asked, “What did the teacher’s aide say?”

“Claims she saw nothing unusual. Said Ms. Raymond was walking around and making sure the students weren’t looking at each other’s papers. The aide did admit that she dozed off for a bit.”

“You know the teacher’s aide is one of his people, right?” the rep asked, pushing up her glasses.

“Of course. She was on the committee that interviewed him for his position,” I said. “She was very pro Mr. Antonio. And I think I remember that she also came from his old school.”

“He came to us with a lot of baggage,” the rep said. “The teachers tell me that the three teachers he brought with him can’t teach, and our teachers are afraid to speak up during teacher

or staff development meetings because they think his teachers are Mr. Antonio's eyes and ears. Everything goes back to him," she said, fondling her wedding ring.

"I feel the same way about Ms. Raymond," Ms. Stewart said. "She's always in his office. I'm afraid to say anything to her myself because I worry she'll distort what I say."

"He's duplicitous," the rep said, then turned to Ms. Stewart, cocked her head, and suddenly became very animated. "You should call the district testing coordinator. Tell her you reported the incident to the assistant principal in charge of testing at your school, but you thought you should inform her, too. Can you do that?"

"I don't want to get fired," Ms. Stewart said, clicking her pen. "Mr. Antonio intimidates me." She was quiet. Then, "I'll do it. I must. After all, Ms. Raymond wanted my kids to cheat on a state test."

The rep got up and hit the gadget again, trying to reduce the tension in my office. 'That was stupid.' We all laughed.

"What Ms. Raymond did goes against everything I've been teaching my students this year about being honest and taking responsibility for their actions. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't do what I tell them to do." She clicked her pen again.

"Thank you," the rep and I said, in unison.

"By the way, what did the district testing coordinator tell you to do?" the rep asked.

I looked straight into the rep's hazel eyes. "Mr. Antonio forbade me to call her. Said he'd take care of everything."

The next day, during her preparation period, Ms. Stewart entered my office and sunk into my couch.

“Mr. Antonio got to them,” she said, her head down so all I could see was her hair. “My students changed their statements. All but six.”

“Are those the statements?” I asked, gesturing to the papers in her lap. “May I see them?”

Ms. Stewart stood up and handed them to me.

“The six are on the bottom.” she said.

I flipped through the students’ testimonies. “I didn’t see anything,” one student wrote. Another: “I am telling the truth. I didn’t see anything.” “Some kids said Ms. Raymond told them the answers, but they just want to get her in trouble. I didn’t see her do nothing bad,” wrote another. I read aloud a portion of Miguel’s statement: “During the math test, Ms. Raymond told me to change some of my answers, but I didn’t. I knew mine were correct. I tried to explain to her how I got the answer to a question, but she told me to be quiet. I’m surprised she doesn’t remember you gotta solve what’s in the parentheses first, when doing order of operations. That’s why she got the wrong answer.”

I read aloud a portion of Samantha’s statement: “Ms. Raymond stood between mine and Miguel’s desks during the math test. She told us to change some answers. I rechecked the ones she pointed to on my answer sheet, but I didn’t change them because I knew I chose the right answers.”

I started to laugh. “Ms. Raymond wanted to give the students the correct answers, but she actually pointed to the wrong ones, and she didn’t even know it.”

“She’s not too bright. Mr. Antonio brought her from their previous school,” Ms. Stewart said.

I shook my head. “The dumb and dumber duo.”

The following morning after the Pledge of Allegiance and the announcements, the math and literacy coaches, the grade leaders--teachers representing each grade from kindergarten through fifth—and I assembled in Mr. Antonio’s office for a meeting. He sat down behind his desk and stared ahead, a despondent look on his face. He was wearing the same white shirt and gray slacks he wore yesterday and had not shaved.

“I have some very disturbing news,” Mr. Antonio said, running his hands through his greasy spiked black hair. “The superintendent called me early this morning. The Office of Special Investigations will conduct a thorough investigation of the cheating allegation. Many staff members will likely be called in for questioning. Unfortunately, Ms. Raymond has been reassigned to the district office for the duration of the investigation. Until further notice, I will supervise the teachers of upper grades. Ms. Zimmerman will be responsible for kindergarten through second grade.”

At that moment, surprised by the news, the teachers whom I supervise turned to look at me questioningly.

Mr. Antonio looked past me with that same despondent stare. “Ms. Zimmerman’s office will be across the yard in the mini-building with the kindergarten classes,” he said.

I briefly caught his eyes, glared at him, and shook my head, as if to say, what gives? The teachers and I now understood what was happening. Retaliation. *Not only am I being isolated from the school community, but I now need to run back and forth between two buildings to service the grades I supervise.*

I heard Mr. Antonio stayed in his office for several hours that afternoon. Maybe he was

strategizing. *If Ms. Raymond was removed from her administrative position and assigned to the district office so quickly, certainly he knows he is next in line. Even though he initially had the support of the superintendent, I'm sure the superintendent told Mr. Antonio he couldn't risk losing his own job. I know Mr. Antonio has a wife, young children, and a house on Long Island. Surely, he's worried about losing his job and license. He should be.*"

At the end of the day, Mr. Antonio sent home a letter to the parents informing them of the alleged testing improprieties, assuring them that the allegations against Ms. Raymond are false, and telling them that this incident will not affect their children's high-quality education.

I settled into my new office and soon acquired respect for the kindergarten teachers' pedagogical skills. Although I didn't know the curriculum for kindergarten, I quickly familiarized myself with the state learning expectations for the grade. I purchased a few stuffed animals so that the children who were brought to my office would feel comfortable.

The atmosphere in the main building at Pebble Elementary was very tense during the next week. Whenever I went there to visit my first and second grade classes and passed Mr. Antonio in the halls, he lowered his head. He excluded me from staff meetings, but Ms. Stewart and the rep visited me during their lunch periods and kept me abreast of everything.

"Everyone's so on edge in the main building!" they'd exclaim whenever they came over.

"The teachers' patience has become short, and they're snapping at their students," the rep said. "The dean's office is filled with students whom the teachers would ordinarily not send to him."

Ms. Stewart added, "Cliques are springing up everywhere, and no one talks in the

hallways, anymore. Mr. Antonio comes to my classroom every day, stays nearly thirty minutes, and is always taking notes.”

“Does he discuss with you what he observes?” I asked, trying to determine if he was rating her teaching ability.

“Nope. Doesn’t talk to my students, either. Just plops down in a seat in the back and writes. It’s nerve-wracking.”

“I’m sure that’s his intention,” I said. “Retaliation.”

In the coming weeks, all of the staff members and students involved in the investigation and I were assigned attorneys and our statements taken. The rep told me everyone was nervous and fearful about what to expect at the hearing. She also said Mr. Antonio told her to inform the staff that he continues to believe in Ms. Raymond’s innocence and vowed to stick up for her in court.

On the day of the hearing, the courtroom was filled with students and parents, district personnel, and Pebble Elementary School staff eager to hear the outcome of the charges against Ms. Raymond. The Office of Special Investigations found the students’ testimonies credible, and the judge deemed Ms. Raymond’s actions egregious. During the cross-examination, the teacher’s aide who was in the classroom with Ms. Raymond admitted that she napped on and off, and the few character witnesses who testified on Ms. Raymond’s behalf could not provide substantive testimony. Ms. Raymond lost her administrative license and was banned from ever again working for the New York City Department of Education.

To everyone’s surprise, Mr. Antonio was nowhere to be seen, and a few days later, the

superintendent reported that Mr. Antonio had resigned from the New York City Department of Education. I was not surprised when I encountered one of his friends at a meeting, and he informed me that Mr. Antonio had taken a job as principal at a Long Island school. It seemed to me that Mr. Antonio knew what was in store for him and decided to bolt before the probe began. The Office of Special Investigations cited Mr. Antonio's resignation in its written decision and noted that he, too, is banned from ever again working for the New York City Department of Education.

With the support of the superintendent, I accepted the principalship at Pebble Elementary, and Ms. Stewart became my assistant principal. Mr. Antonio's three teachers and the math coach transferred to different schools, and Ms. Stewart and I worked hard to rebuild and raise the school morale. Together, we analyzed the results of the state reading and math scores and devised ways to address the students' deficiencies. Within three years, Pebble Elementary became a showcase school and we were proud of it.

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Bio:

Carol Pierce holds a B.A. in English, an M.S.Ed. and a Professional Certificate in Supervision and Administration from Hunter College. She was a teacher and Assistant Principal with the NYC Department of Education for 26 years. Her stories have appeared online in Drunk Monkeys, The Write Launch, and in Griffel.no.

