

# Promotion or Retention? A Normative Case Study of Innovation Academy

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On a sweltering afternoon in early June, the eighth grade team at Innovation Academy was gathered in Ms. Castro's room, grade books open on the desks pulled into a rough circle. A fan whirred in the background, bringing a faint hint of breeze as it slowly rotated. Mrs. Angly cleared her throat, but before she could speak, another announcement blared over the PA. "Teachers, please remember to submit students' final grades and graduation robe measurements to the office by 5 pm today. No exceptions. Mr. Thomson is already overdue with the order." Mrs. Angly and Mr. Rodriguez both winced. This is why they were meeting, to make the tough decisions about who actually would graduate the following week.

With a slight cough, Mrs. Angly started again to speak. "I just think there's got to be another way. If we hold Adahuaris back, we know she's just going to drop out. She turns 16 this October. She's not going to stick around the eighth grade, hanging out with the 13 year-old babies. I know she hasn't achieved everything that we hope for her—or that she hopes for herself. But consider the circumstances. Also, what good does it do anybody if she drops out? That's the fastest route to poverty I know."

Ms. Castro and Mr. Rodriguez glanced at one another; then Ms. Castro spoke up. "But Barbara, what good does it do if we promote her? Adahuaris is reading at a fifth grade level. There's no way she'll be able to handle the texts they throw at her in high school. We provided her support almost every day after school, and even so, she's failing social studies. And science. Not to mention her 17 absences this spring. Other kids have struggles at home, but they pull it together. I know you love Ada. We all love do. We all want her to succeed. But wishing can't make it so."

Mr. Rodriguez chimed in, "Don't confuse caring for Ada with making it easy for her. You know I grew up here. Nobody made it easy for me—and if they had, I would have been worse off. You can't survive by being soft."

"I'm being soft by refusing to countenance that we contribute to another teenage dropout and pregnancy statistic? By saying that her absences maybe shouldn't be held against her while she was bounced among three different foster homes this spring, all the time grieving for her brother?! By pointing out that maybe her hard work should stand her in good stead, rather than be used to prove that she can't make it?!!" Mrs. Angly's voice had risen despite herself. She knew she shouldn't take this personally, that they all wanted to do what was right by their kids, that they had to stay united if they were going to survive the challenges of Innovation Academy.

She paused, took a deep breath, and started again a half-octave lower. “I don’t know how to look Adahuaris in the eye and tell her that we think she needs to hang tough in the eighth grade one more year. That somehow next year is going to be different from this year. That her best just isn’t good enough. How do I tell her that?” Mrs. Angly wiped sweat from her face, hoping it wouldn’t be mistaken for tears—although she wasn’t sure even she could tell the difference any more.

The room fell silent, save the grinding fan, as each teacher reflected on the challenge that was Adahuaris. Nobody disputed Ms. Angly’s prediction that Ada would drop out if she were retained. She had entered Innovation Academy over age, having been retained in second grade by her elementary school principal. He was known to hold back kids whose poor reading skills would bring down the school’s standardized test scores when they began in third grade. Not that an extra year had made much of a difference for Adahuaris; she had entered eighth grade reading at a third-grade level. Still, she had made amazing progress in reading that year. Thanks to Ms. Castro’s efforts with her during and after school, and Innovation Academy’s new extra literacy block for struggling readers, Ada had tested at a solid fifth grade reading level on the May tests. She had made two years’ growth in a single year—a year in which she also watched her brother die from a gunshot wound on their front porch, and found herself shuttled around the foster system through a series of ever-more dysfunctional homes. Her progress had inspired everyone, not least Adahuaris herself. No wonder she stayed after school every day; it was the most welcoming and stable place she had in her life.

Her grades were admittedly a problem. She had a 55 average in social studies, and was doing even worse in science. Her failing science grade was thanks in part to the science teacher’s going on maternity leave; Mr. Beecher, the long-term sub, couldn’t help Ada make up work she had missed while moving among foster homes. On the other hand, Ada also hadn’t kept up with her science assignments even when she was in school. Her homework average was in the 40s, and even though Mr. Beecher offered to let Ada retake a test she had bombed, she hadn’t done so. “What’s the point, Mr. B?” she responded when he pressed her. “We both know I ain’t gonna do no better the second time round. And, no offense, but it’s not like you going to become Mr. Science now, neither.” Mr. Beecher couldn’t dispute that. Although he had been working twelve-hour days, for less than half the pay of regular teachers and no benefits, he still found teaching science challenging—no small surprise for a French and theater major. He had taken the sub job at Innovation Academy to add some teaching experience to his resume, not because he had any aspiration to become “Mr. Science.” Mr. Beecher stayed silent, doodling in the margins of his lesson plan book, unsure what he had to offer to the conversation.

Mrs. Angly tore a sheet of paper out of a notebook and drew a T-chart in thick black marker. Scooting her desk further into the middle of the circle so the others could see what she was writing, she labeled the left side of the chart “Actions”; on the right side, she wrote “Outcomes.” Grabbing a red pen, she started filling in the chart. “Retain her” on the left was matched by

“Ada drops out” on the right. Mrs. Angly looked up, making eye contact with Mr. Rodriguez, Ms. Castro, and Mr. Beecher in turn, as if daring them to contradict her. None did.

Next, she wrote “Send Ada to summer school.” Ms. Castro gave a wan smile, reached over, and crossed it out. They all knew that budget troubles had led to the district’s deciding in April to eliminate summer school for middle schoolers this year. Ada had been hoping to do credit recovery over the summer, which is part of what made it feel unfair to retain her. She could have retaken social studies and science if summer school were still an option. On the other hand, the April decision came early enough that other students at risk of failure had stepped up to the plate, worked their tails off, and earned final quarter grades that were high enough to give them a passing average for the year. Ada hadn’t.

Pencil still in hand, Ms. Castro pulled the paper onto her desk and wrote under Actions, “Give Ada passing grades in science and social studies.” She drew two lines pointing to the right side of the T-chart, which she filled in: “Ada learns there aren’t consequences for her actions,” “Other students learn that standards don’t matter.” After a pause, she slowly added a third line and wrote, “A. feels grateful for second chance and gets on track.” Ms. Castro pushed the T-chart back into the middle of the circle and then looked down. Seeing a memo from the principal on her desk, she flipped it over and drew a large question mark covering the back, cross-hatching it carefully in gray pencil.

A whine emanated from the corner of the room, where the fan had gotten stuck. Mr. Rodriguez stood up and strode over to fix it. With his back to the group, he posed a question. “Why are we willing to bend the rules for Ada, when we didn’t bend them for Joachim, D’Andre, or Sylvania? Why are we willing to forfeit our expectations for this child but not for the others? D’Andre arrived three months ago. We’ve never met his mom. How do we know he isn’t battling as much as Adahuaris is? What’s to say D’Andre doesn’t have it even worse?”

Giving the fan a practiced thwack to start it rotating again, Mr. Rodriguez turned and faced the group. “We’re the Innovation Academy eighth grade team. We’re the ones who agreed we wouldn’t play the game of pretending to teach while our students pretended to learn. We decided together that we would stand by our graduates: that we could guarantee when they walked across the stage, they were ready to succeed in high school, then college, and beyond. Are we ready to give that commitment up, to sacrifice our integrity and the values we stand for so soon?” Mr. Rodriguez was pacing back and forth, hyped up, looking each of his colleagues in the eye as he spoke. “Barbara, do you really think that Ada couldn’t have earned the five points to lift her social studies grade to a D- if she had wanted to? Chuck, are you ready to start your teaching career by falsifying a student’s grade? Maria, do you think any of us will be able to push our kids next year if they know we passed a failing student on this year? It’s not just Ada we need to think about. We owe all of our students the guarantee that an Innovation Academy diploma means something real. We owe them all our integrity, and our love. We show them that through our high expectations.”

Mr. Beecher shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and finally spoke. “What about the alternative school? Doesn’t it serve kids like Adahuaris? Couldn’t she go there in the fall and then maybe start high school in the spring?” His voice trailed off as all three teachers stared at him disbelievingly.

“Have you ever visited there?” Ms. Angly asked. “It’s the express bus on the school to prison pipeline. Adahuaris would get eaten alive there. We care about her, at least, and we want to show her the right way forward. Those teachers? They’re lucky if they keep the stabbings under control. Even if she survives, she wouldn’t learn anything there.”

Ms. Castro concurred. “I didn’t spend every day after school with Ada to watch her get fed to the lions. She has potential. She’s a good kid. No way we’re sending her to that crazy house.”

Mr. Thompson’s voice then boomed out over the PA. “Eighth grade teachers, I’m still waiting on grade sheets and graduation robe measurements. I can’t hold off any longer. Respect the deadline, please. I expect you to bring them down to the office in the next ten minutes.”

Stricken, the eighth grade team looked at one another. What should they do?