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# Prologue

As the last of several school buses pulled away from the parking lot and headed for neighborhoods all over town, one of Julie's students stood in the back window, smiling and slowly waving. Julie smiled, remembering how often that particular seventh grader had located and stepped on her last nerve during the school year. But it was June now, and the staff of Julie's middle school had just finished waving goodbye to all the kids in all the buses at noon on this last day of school for students. As that last bus disappeared around the corner of the building, there was a moment of silence—then a mighty cheer welcomed the arrival of summer. It was high fives all around, and the teachers headed for their cars and lunch on their own.

Becky, another seventh-grade teacher on Julie's four-person Falcon Team, approached her and said, "Are you coming with us to lunch?"

"You go ahead, Becky," said Julie. "I made a small cake last night, and I'll treat the team to dessert when you return."

Frowning slightly, Becky said, "Are you okay?"

Julie smiled and said, "I'm fine. Really, I just want to sit and think for a bit. I'll see you when you get back. We can have the cake in my classroom."

"Sounds good to me. See you later," said Becky. "We'll be at our usual haunt for lunch if you change your mind."

"Thanks," replied Julie.

Becky went toward the teacher parking lot, leaving Julie on the sidewalk by the bus loop. There was a small wooden bench with a dedication plate to a former teacher along the walkway into the building; the weather was sunny and warm, and the truth was that Julie needed to be alone for a few minutes. She needed to think, and she went back into the building, heading for the teacher's lounge. She reached into the refrigerator and retrieved a sandwich and a seedless orange, along with a bottle of water. Then she walked back to the bench near where the buses had pulled out just a few minutes before.

Julie had been teaching at this middle school for three years, and she had just received a continuing contract. At this point in her career,

her future seemed assured—except for the minor fact that she was not sure she was succeeding for and with her students. The kids changed each year, of course, but she was keenly aware that this third year of teaching looked pretty much like the first and second years. The social studies curriculum was dictated by the district, based on state standards. This meant, of course, that the *what* was prescribed but the *how* of what she did was up to her—and this is where she was beginning to think the problem, if there was one, lay.

What little feedback she received on a daily, weekly, and yearly basis told her she was a pretty good teacher. Her summary evaluations had been good, but the standard district evaluation was in the form of a checklist that told her little. She was observed each quarter in her first year, and twice in her second and third years. During her first year in the classroom, her teacher mentor had told her his door was always open, and if she had questions she should not hesitate to track him down to get answers. Again, all this resulted in little in the way of feedback, and to someone like Julie who honestly wanted to get better at the *how* of teaching, this lack of substantive feedback was the basis for more than a little frustration on her part.

So here she was on this beautiful early-June afternoon, sitting on a bench and wondering how to go about getting better at her chosen profession. There was no question of not returning for a fourth year; she had signed a contract, and she would physically return in August. As she took a bite of her sandwich, Julie came to the conclusion that she must take the time this summer to explore ways to become a better teacher. She was aware that there was no systemic, organizational approach to improvement evident in her middle school; summary evaluations were it, and they provided Julie with little in the way of the kind of constructive feedback she might need to identify strengths and weaknesses, and make changes.

Still, Julie could find time to reflect on those past three years and ask herself why she thought she had been less than effective. She could look at test results, along with the quality of the essays she had her students write on a consistent basis. Was *she* providing enough feedback for her students? A winter workshop had introduced her to the comparative value of formative and summative assessments; should *she* be using more formative assessment pieces? Julie realized vaguely that she was doing too much work, and her students too little. What made her think that? She munched on a segment of her orange and came to the realization that a good deal of personal reflection was in the works for her this summer.

She also determined to bring together her Falcon Team partners in an attempt to pick their brains and do a little collective reflection as it related to the team itself. Julie was not the most experienced member

of the team, but the others seemed to look up to her on occasion, and perhaps it was time for them to look at how they did what they did as a team. Each of them had strengths and weaknesses in terms of their approach to teaching and their methods of delivery, and those different perspectives might make for some powerful group reflection, assuming Julie could get them all together for an extended block of time.

Of her three teammates on the seventh-grade Falcon Team, one was retiring. This was, in her opinion, just as well; he was one of the most negative people Julie had ever met, and it was one reason she did not want to go to lunch with them today. He would be complaining about the weather, the curriculum, the parents, the color of the paint on the walls in his classroom, the administrators, and, most annoyingly to Julie, the students. This man really did not like kids much, and the kids knew it. Hopefully, his replacement would be someone with whom everyone could work, and whose attitude would reside somewhere outside the depths of despair. The mood would lift with his departure, and Julie looked forward to meeting a new math teacher in July.

Becky, the English teacher on the Falcon Team, would begin her second year in August, and she was extremely positive. Their fourth teammate, Yolanda, was an excellent science teacher and had taught Julie much in the three years they had been together. All in all, then, this coming year should be better, but Julie was still going to focus on how to become a better teacher. If the school's administrative leadership or the entire Falcon Team was willing to put into place a continuous-improvement model of some sort, so much the better; regardless, Julie was determined to turn her classroom into a more learning-centered environment. During the school year that had just ended, a really supportive assistant principal had arranged for Julie to visit the classroom of an outstanding seventh-grade social studies teacher at another middle school in the district. She had been amazed at how much the students had accomplished in that fifty-minute class, and she determined to begin her continuous-improvement efforts with a phone call to that teacher this afternoon. Julie would invite her to lunch, in hopes of picking her brain and getting some advice.

Julie truly loved her students, and she enjoyed teaching social studies, but she determined that this fourth year would be different. She would try to put into place a system of some sort that would accelerate improvement for her and for her seventh graders. She was convinced that this continuous-improvement journey would also guarantee that she would continue to enjoy teaching, while better serving those students in her care. Before the status quo became a comfortable rut for Julie, as appeared to be the case for some other teachers in her building, she would make some changes in the way she approached the *how* of what she did.