

BEAVIS & Barbie Holding Students Accountable... To What?

There is a bet that I like to make with teachers. The wager is this.

Imagine that on one side of your classroom you have Ken and Barbie, Mattel's version of the typical American teenagers. On the other side, you have Beavis and Butthead, MTV's version of the typical American teenagers. In years past, Beavis and Barbie were placed in different math classes. But now in the political climate of public education, they are enrolled in the same class with the same expectations. "Algebra for all" includes Beavis as well as Barbie.

Here is my bet. I will bet \$100 that Barbie passes your class and that Beavis fails. This is no guarantee, but I think that eight out of ten times I will win. In the long run, I am going to make a lot of money.

That is my bet. Now it is your turn. You must wager the same \$100 — that Barbie knows more math than Beavis. Are you willing to bet your own cash on that one?

I have yet to have anybody take me up on the bet. I would not take that bet either. That is the point. Who determines whether or not these students pass or fail? We do! Yet, we are not willing to bet that those who pass actually know more than those who fail.

If mathematical knowledge and skill are not the criteria we use to evaluate students, then what is? Theodore Sizer, Brown University professor and author of *Horace's Compromise*, suggests that the number one criteria for getting a high school diploma in America is docility. In other words, the students who show up, sit down and shut up will pass. Those that do not conform, fail.

I believe that Sizer's critique, while harsh, is candid and true. While much of Sizer's criticism is aimed at the current public education system as a whole, my hypothetical wager points out that part of the problem is with us — the teachers.

Take another Beavis and Barbie example. Let us imagine that at the end of the course, they both have a 68% in the class, needing a 70% to pass. Barbie of course has done all her homework, attended school consistently and asked numerous questions. Beavis, on the other hand, has ditched a day or two, has many missing assignments and has either slept through class or disrupted it regularly.

They both have 68%. Again, I bet \$100 — Barbie passes and Beavis fails. I know this happens, because throughout my career I have heard teachers share this very story. "Oh, she worked so hard and he was such a slacker." They tell it with pride, because they believe they are instilling the great American work ethic and promoting a just and orderly society.

Yet, think about the scenario more carefully. While Barbie completed all her assignments, Beavis did few to none. That means Beavis must be scoring better on tests in order to achieve the same grade. In other words, Beavis actually knows more math, yet Barbie gets the nod and Beavis gets the boot.

Why? Because Beavis is Beavis.

I must admit, that for as critical as I am of this phenomenon, I know that it exists in my own classroom. If I were to rank my students according to the grades they earned in my class, I know the upper portion of the list would be ruled by Barbies, and the bottom dwellers would be predominantly Beavises.



Barbie will pass...



...and Beavis will fail.

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Beavis & Barbie (continued)

This year I have found data at our school that further supports the hypothesis that the school system is inherently biased against Beavis. As with many schools, ours has extended courses in Algebra and Geometry. These courses are designed to take the “struggling” student through the normal curriculum at a much slower pace. We found that these extended students scored better on the state’s standardized test than the “regular” students. In other words, the extended program is effective in improving the mathematical abilities of these students.

Unfortunately, we have no extended program for Algebra Two. So what happens to the extended students when, after two years of a slow but fruitful pace, they enroll in this advanced course? They again become a struggling student. The course moves at a blistering pace that favors the student who is good at taking notes and memorizing for tests — Barbie. We improved the extended pupils’ intellectual abilities, but not their work ethic. They are better mathematicians, but not better students. Therefore, after all the previous success, Beavis will still fail.

Why? Because Beavis is still Beavis.

So now that my little but mighty wagger has called us on the carpet, and exposed our propensity to favor the Barbies over the Beavises, what do we do? How do we help both Barbie and Beavis to learn more math and, in doing so, help them both to succeed academically?

Here are a few thoughts. Confess, focus, question, experiment and commit. First we must *confess* that we teachers are both part of the problem and a key part of the solution. Then we must *focus* on holding students accountable to what truly matters — their mathematical abilities. To do that we need to *question* everything that we do from instruction to classroom management to grading, and evaluate whether or not these procedures are promoting mathematical competency. We will find that many of them do not, so we must *experiment* and find techniques that do. Lastly, we must firmly *commit* to developing the conceptual understanding of students. We must teach them to truly understand what they are doing and not just mimic what we are doing so that they can pass the next test.

We can do these things and help the Beavises of the world; or we can point a finger at them and let them shoulder the blame. If we choose to criticize instead of help, we will continue to perpetuate the development of more Barbies — academically successful, but mathematically incompetent. However, if we do care about Beavis’ academic success, and the mathematical competency of both Barbie and Beavis, then we the teachers need to change. Beavis will not succeed unless we do.

Why? Because Beavis will always be Beavis.