

## *Sarah Hanover*

*A first-year high school math teacher is confronted by angry parents when she gives their son, an outstanding math student, a lower grade than expected because he never turned in his homework.*

The secretary's voice on the faculty lounge intercom was difficult to hear because of the static. "Mrs. Hanover, there's a call for you on line seven," Sarah heard dimly.

She called toward the speaker, "I'm on my way," and headed down the hall to the math office, wondering who was trying to reach her at 7:40 on a Monday morning.

The caller identified himself as James Kilson's father.

"Good morning, Mr. Kilson. Is James OK?" Sarah asked.

"Well, he's OK except for his math grade," Mr. Kilson responded. "I'm unclear as to why James got a B in your class."

"Did you ask James? I'm pretty sure he knows why he got a B." Sarah softened her voice so that her comment would not seem hostile.

Mr. Kilson responded. "He told us that he got a B because he didn't do the homework."

Sarah said, "That's exactly right. Homework is one of the class requirements."

Mr. Kilson's voice sounded angry. "But he gets perfect scores on the tests without doing homework. Why would you have such a requirement?"

"Not all the students understand new concepts in math as quickly as James. In fact, most students need all the practice they can get. If I didn't require homework and base part of the grade on its being completed, most students wouldn't do it and they'd learn less."

Mr. Kilson sounded puzzled. "I understand that. But why should James have to do the homework when he doesn't need it?"

"All students need to do homework. It's part of learning some discipline."

"Forget that. James is not a discipline problem." His tone moderated as he went on: "You must know how important grades are to high school students, particularly students like James, who plan to apply to highly competitive colleges. This is not a contest between your will and James's. He *needs* high grades

for college. All his test scores show that he's doing A work. His math grade should reflect what he knows."

Sarah forced herself not to sound angry or defensive as she responded to Mr. Kilson. "I think you're missing the point here. Homework was one of the course requirements. James got a B because he chose not to do the homework."

"I'm assuming from this conversation that you're not going to change James's grade." Sarah thought that Mr. Kilson sounded frustrated.

"I don't think that he earned a higher grade. When he meets all the class requirements, he'll get an A."

"My wife and I would like to talk to you in person about this. I would ask you to think about what I said so that there might be room for some more discussion between us. When would be a convenient time?" Mr. Kilson did not sound like the type of person who would take no for an answer.

Sarah quickly brought her schedule to mind. "I have a preparation period from 11:06 to 11:48, or we could meet after school. The students leave at 2:50 and I'd be willing to meet you at 3:00, if that would be more convenient."

Mr. Kilson responded, "We'll see you at 3:00 this afternoon, if today is convenient. Where shall we meet?"

Sarah replied, "This afternoon is fine. I'm in room 336 at that time; that's on the third floor of the math wing. When you come in the front door, walk past the office and take the first stairs to your left."

"We'll find it. Thank you for making yourself available."

Sarah said, "You're welcome, Mr. Kilson. Have a nice day." Once the words were out of her mouth, she could have kicked herself. She hated that expression, but in her nervousness she had used it to end her conversation with James Kilson's father.

Sarah replaced the receiver and left the math department office, her heart pounding. She was a new teacher, and Mr. Kilson was the first parent to call her with a complaint. In the two months since school started, her only parent contacts were ones she initiated, and they were made to ask for the parents' help with a problem student.

As she walked to her classroom, she thought about James Kilson. It occurred to her that this call should *not* have come as a surprise. After all, James was the best math student in her third-period honors precalculus class.

James was a pleasant boy, easy to have in the class (although he informed her on the first day of class that he did not like to be called Jim, or Jimmy, or Jimbo, and offered about half a dozen nicknames or variations on his name that he would not answer to). He had a 98 average on the tests and quizzes Sarah had given during the marking period. He was also her best peer tutor and a willing participant in class discussions. James was obviously an A student, except for one flaw: He never turned in homework. And that was why Sarah gave him a B for the grading period.

In September, Sarah was overly prepared to begin the school year—intense preparation was her typical response to anxiety. Although becoming a math teacher was something she had been working toward for the past two years, actually being offered a job had caused her as much anxiety as pleasure.

Sarah described herself as a "traditional rebel"—an oxymoron she took delight in. When she graduated from college in the early 1980s, she was one of

only a few women in her class with a degree in business. She married immediately after college graduation (her traditional side) and went to work for a *Fortune* 500 company as a management trainee. Within a few years she was earning as much as her husband, a computer engineer. After ten years with the company, she took a leave of absence to have a child. She returned to work when her son was 6 months old. A year later she was pregnant with a second child, and she and her husband agreed that raising young children was going to be very difficult with both parents pursuing corporate careers; so after her daughter was born, she resigned from the company. As her children grew, Sarah started to think about another career.

Teaching seemed a natural choice. Sarah had done some training on her job and had enjoyed helping others gain new skills. She investigated options and discovered that she could be certified in math with two years of part-time study. By the time her daughter was ready for kindergarten, Sarah was a certified math teacher. She was offered a full-time position at Littleton High School early in June, giving her nearly three months to prepare for her new position.

Her preparation included establishing overt grading standards, which she shared with her students on the first day of class. She even put her requirements on the topic schedule she handed out to each class, believing that she should identify class requirements explicitly so that the students would know exactly what she expected. She didn't want them to be surprised by their grades, as she often had been as a student, and as were so many students she had observed as a student teacher.

One of her requirements was homework, and she made it clear that she took homework seriously. As she explained to her students: "I'm assigning you homework every night but Friday because you will need to practice what we are learning in class, and there won't be enough time in class for you to get that practice. By doing homework every night, you'll get a better handle on the material, and I'll have a better idea of what you know."

In each of her classes, several students asked if she would grade the homework. The first time she was asked the question, Sarah paused before answering. "Let me put it like this. I will go over all your homework as a way of finding out how you are doing with the material. Your homework will let me know who needs extra practice and what I'll need to reteach if lots of you didn't understand something. It will also tell me that we can move ahead faster than I had planned if I see that everyone in the class is doing very well. But I won't put a grade on each homework assignment. You need to have the freedom to use the homework as a means of indicating that you don't understand something. So the only grade will be a check or minus. If you try to do the homework each night, even if you get stuff wrong, you'll get a check. If you don't turn it in, or if you turn in only part of it, you'll get a minus. With a few minuses, your grade will be affected. I expect all of you to do each of the homework assignments."

Sarah thought about that conversation and realized that she was on firm ground with the grade she had given to James. She tried to put her upcoming encounter with the Kilsons out of her mind as she went through her day. Nevertheless, her thoughts kept returning to the afternoon's meeting, particularly during third period. Sarah did not say anything to James about his parents'

upcoming visit, and he did not mention the early morning call to her. She wondered if he knew about it.

By the end of the day, the meeting with the Kilsons was all Sarah could think about. When the door of room 336 swung closed behind the last student at 2:50, Sarah stood to erase the board as she nervously awaited Mr. and Mrs. Kilson's arrival. As she mentally went over their position and tried to imagine the additional arguments they might make, she began to wonder, for the first time since she had established her grading requirements, if they were correct. A nagging doubt began to grow that her focus on the explicitness of the grading system had obscured her attention to its content. Were the requirements themselves wrong? Since the conversation with Mr. Kilson hadn't been a lengthy one, she hadn't really had the opportunity to expand on her position or to hear his in detail. Was she really clear about the arguments on both sides of this issue?

Sarah heard a sound at the classroom door and quickly set down the eraser and dusted off her hands. She took a deep breath as she walked toward the opening door.