

## Data-Based personnel decisions: Baker Middle's Intensive Support List

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### **Abstract:**

Focused on the use of teacher evaluation data, this case was designed for use in two principal licensure courses, one on data literacy and the other on supervision and personnel. The principal of Baker Middle School has been instructed by the superintendent to use data from the state's new teacher evaluation system to determine which teachers should be placed on the district's Intensive Support List (ISL). Those on the list receive additional support but are subject to termination proceedings if they do not evidence sufficient growth. Students must analyze available data, identify which teachers should be on the ISL, and defend their decisions or alternatively craft an advocacy plan in objection to the ISL.

**Keywords:** Multiple-measures teacher evaluation system | data-driven decision-making | value-added

### **Article:**

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## Case Narrative

As a Race to the Top state, North Carolina has implemented a new, multiple-measure teacher evaluation system that includes data from the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers (based on observations and artifacts) and data from test-based value-added (VA) measures of teacher effectiveness (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2009). Value-added models (VAMs) use sophisticated statistical processes to estimate the unique contributions of districts, schools, and teachers to student achievement gains (Harris, 2011; Jennings & Corcoran, 2009; Linn, 2008; Papay, 2011; Sanders, Saxton, & Horn, 1997). Ratings from the Rubric and from a 3-year, rolling average of VA scores determine a teacher’s status as *in need of improvement*, *effective*, or *highly effective* (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2009). Rubric scores are based on five standards: *demonstrate leadership*, *establish environment*, *know content*, *facilitate learning*, and *reflect on practice*. For each of these standards, rating categories are *not demonstrated*, *developing*, *proficient*, *accomplished*, and *distinguished*. VA rating categories are *does not meet expected growth*, *meets expected growth*, and *exceeds expected growth*. Table 1 illustrates the matrix used to identify teacher status based on Rubric ratings and VA ratings.

**Table 1. Matrix for Determining North Carolina Teacher Status.**

Measurement instrument	Status: In need of improvement	Status: Effective	Status: Highly effective
Rubric for evaluating North Carolina teachers (Standards 1-5) <sup>a</sup>	Any rating lower than proficient on Standards 1-5	Proficient or higher on Standards 1-5	Accomplished or higher on Standards 1-5
Value-added 3-year, rolling average <sup>b</sup>	and/or Does not meet expected growth	and Meets or exceeds expected growth	and Exceeds expected growth

Source. Adapted from NCDPI RttT Initiative workshop (2012).

<sup>a</sup>Rating levels are *not demonstrated*, *developing*, *proficient*, *accomplished*, and *distinguished*.

<sup>b</sup>Rating levels are *does not meet expected growth*, *meets expected growth*, and *exceeds expected growth*.

### Context

Lauren County School District (LCSD) is located in central North Carolina. Geographically sizable, high schools, 4 middle schools, and 9 elementary schools. The district values tradition the district is largely rural with several small towns. It serves about 13,000 students, approximately 60% of whom are White, 20% are African American, 12% are Hispanic/Latino, and 8% are Multi-racial/Other. About 61% of students are on free/reduced lunch. The district includes 2 comprehensive and tends to be slow to change.

The LCSD Board of Education recently voted 4-1 in favor of Superintendent Dr. Eva Moore’s recommendation that district teacher evaluation policy be amended to incorporate the use of the Intensive Support List (ISL; described below). Dr. Moore, just completing her first year as superintendent of LCSD, had originally described her ideas for the ISL during her interview for the superintendency. During the interview, Board President Cammy Newton—known for being hardnosed and persuasive—had asked Dr. Moore what she would do as superintendent to increase teacher effectiveness in LCSD. Dr. Moore had responded, “Teachers who are mediocre or ineffective should be given prescriptions for improvement. If they improve, so much the

better. If they don't, they should be shown the door." Dr. Moore, who had just completed 3 years in her first superintendency in a middle class outer urban ring district in Ohio—a collective bargaining state—had explained that the union in her former district had blocked similar efforts and that one of the things that attracted her to North Carolina was its status as a right to work state. Newton had lobbied the Board hard to hire Moore and also advocated for the ISL when it came to the Board for a vote. The only dissenting member of the Board on Moore's hiring and the ISL vote was Helen Cramer, a retired high school English and drama teacher who had taught at Lauren County West High School for 23 years. The new theater at the school was named in her honor.

### *The ISL*

Emboldened by the Board's vote, Dr. Moore has tasked principals with identifying those teachers designated as *in need of improvement* through the new teacher evaluation system who are most in need of intensive support. These teachers will be placed on the district's new ISL. While all teachers within the district develop annual professional growth plans, those on the ISL will develop—in collaboration with their principals—a prescriptive, time-lined plan for improvement. Those on the ISL list will receive additional support in the form of mentoring, professional development, and supervision. Those on the ISL list who do not meet deadlines for prescribed growth will be subject to termination proceedings. The ISL list has been nicknamed the Hit List by teachers.

While Dr. Moore has not stipulated a number or percentage of teachers she expects on the ISL list for each school, she has said that it would be incredibly surprising to her if less than 5% of a school's teachers are on the ISL: "Given our district's mediocre state test scores, it seems improbable to me that more than 95% of our teachers should be lifers," as she refers to teachers who continue to get contracts year after year. Furthermore, Dr. Moore believes that "teachers are the single most important factor for student learning. We can't tolerate ineffective or mediocre teachers. Our students deserve better."

While rating scale data and VA data are used to compute the state's evaluation ratings, Dr. Moore encourages principals to use "all relevant, available data to inform decisions about which teachers in need of improvement are put on the ISL." This includes state achievement test data and perceptual data each school collects in the form of student and parent surveys of teacher quality.

### *Baker Middle School*

Baker Middle School, located in the small town of Middleton, is one of four middle schools in LCSD. Baker serves Grades 7 to 8 and has 60 teachers. About 60% of Baker's students receive free/reduced lunch, 65% are White, 15% are African American, 15% are Latino, and 5% are Mixed race/Other. The school has a growing English Language Learner (ELL) population, comprised mostly of students of Mexican descent. Baker has experienced substantive demographic changes within the past 15 years: The school used to be 95% White and 20% free/reduced lunch.

Middleton has a pronounced sense of community, and Baker Middle enjoys strong parent and community support. Despite student demographic changes, much about the school has remained the same over time, including the aging building and a cadre of teachers who have been teaching at the school for more than 15 years. At the same time, Baker—and Lauren County Schools generally—has had an increasingly difficult time recruiting and retaining quality teachers. The district offers teachers the state base salary, without the supplemental pay offered by several surrounding districts. Last year, all but 3 of Lauren County’s 15 schools were included on the state’s Hard to Staff Schools list.

Baker Middle School Principal Ms. Amy Michaels has 5 years of administrative experience—4 as principal of Baker Middle and 1 as assistant principal of one of the district’s elementary schools. Ms. Michaels is well respected by most Baker faculty, and she highly values the supportive, collaborative climate she has worked with teachers to establish at Baker. Like all principals in Lauren County, she is tasked by Superintendent Dr. Moore with identifying teachers to be on the district’s ISL list.

On a rainy Friday afternoon, the week before she must submit the ISL to Dr. Moore, Ms. Michaels closes her office door and opens her teacher evaluation data folder. Staring down at it, she drops into her desk chair, sighs, props her elbows on her desk, and drops her head into her hands.

Seven of Baker’s 60 teachers were designated as *in need of improvement* based on the new teacher evaluation system. Each of the 7 had failed to meet expected VA growth AND/OR had received a rating lower than proficient on some element of the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers (see Table 1). Ms. Michaels looks at the teachers’ names and groans to herself, “Is this what’s best for kids? What is this ISL going to do to morale? Is it really going to improve teacher effectiveness? Student learning? If teachers are terminated, will I be able to find quality replacements?” Sighing again, she begins to look at her notes on each of the 7 *in need of improvement* teachers, *the Baker seven*.

### *The Baker Seven: Teachers Designated as in Need of Improvement*

To help with her decision, Ms. Michaels has constructed a chart with observation, VA, and perceptual data on each of *the Baker seven* (see Table 2). She reviews the data on each teacher, also considering other salient information about each.

Debbie Draper, a 30-year veteran educator, teaches eighth-grade math. Ms. Draper has been a member of this community her whole life and herself attended Baker. She is the teachers’ association representative for Baker. She is often a naysayer and opposed to change. Nonetheless, she is deeply committed to the school and often jokes that she bleeds the school colors of blue and gold. Students and parents seem to consider her a permanent fixture of the school, like the old clock in the school’s entrance.

Angela Duncan, a seventh-grade math teacher, is in her third year of teaching. She is the only African American teacher in the building. When Ms. Duncan began teaching at Baker, she was

assigned a mentor, and Ms. Duncan continues to work with her mentor informally. She regularly volunteers for committee assignments.

Mark Donegal has taught eighth-grade science for 12 years and is the high school football coach. High achieving students and honors students do exceptionally well in his classes, but hard to reach students flounder and often fail. Ms. Michaels gets more complaints about Mr. Donegal and more requests to transfer out of his class than any other teacher.

Frances Whitlock, a 22-year veteran, teaches eighth-grade English/language arts. She is a strong teacher leader, serves on the School Leadership Council, and has served as a mentor teacher for a number of novice teachers. Ms. Michaels has had struggling teachers observe Ms. Whitlock's pedagogy and classroom management. Ms. Michaels typically assigns struggling students to Ms. Whitlock, who seems to impact even the most challenging students. Ms. Michaels has always held Ms. Whitlock in high esteem and is surprised by Ms. Whitlock's VA data, which has bounced erratically from year to year and which has a 3-year average of below expected growth. Ms. Whitlock's VA scores have really shaken her confidence, and she is even considering leaving the profession. She is flummoxed by her data and does not see herself as doing anything markedly different from year to year that would warrant such large swings in her scores.

Elena Martinez teaches seventh- and eighth-grade ELL and has the largest ELL caseload of all 4 Lauren County middle schools. Ms. Martinez is the only Latina teacher in the building. She translates all parent notices into Spanish and serves as a translator for all school activities. While Ms. Michaels knows little about ELL pedagogy, she knows Ms. Martinez is very committed to her students and the school. There is a 14-percentage point gap between ELL proficiency and the total school proficiency rate. That said, this gap is lower than the state gap, which is 21 percentage points. In addition, a higher percentage of Baker's ELL students pass their end-of-grade tests than do students in demographically similar schools in the state. Ms. Martinez has the lowest VA scores in the building. Ms. Michaels has learned from other principals in the district that many of their ELL teachers also have low VA averages.

Ben Walker, who teaches general music and band, is a 12-year veteran. Because he teaches a non-tested subject, he is the only teacher of the seven who does not have VA data. Parents have been advocating that students who take private music lessons should be exempted from his classes. Since Mr. Walker came to Baker 6 years ago, band enrollment has plummeted, and the band currently has too few students to maintain a performance band, which precludes Baker students from participating in music competitions.

Ruth Mayhew is a 35-year veteran who has taught all 35 years at Baker. Ms. Mayhew is sweet and well-liked by students, parents, and faculty. She jokes that you cannot teach old dogs new tricks. She avoids conflict, and while she never opposes change, she tends to engage in strategic compliance instead of authentic change. She met expected growth on her 3-year VA data but is considered *in need of improvement* due to her "developing" rating in three standards on the rating scale. Ms. Michaels felt awkward rating a 35-year veteran as "developing" but was convinced that the rating fit her observations of Ms. Mayhew.

**Table 2.** Data on Teachers Designated as *in Need of Improvement*.

Teacher	Observation data	VA data	Perceptual/other data
Debbie Draper: eighth-grade math; 28-year veteran; White female	Designated as developing in <i>facilitate learning</i> and proficient on all other standards. Debbie teaches to the textbook and not to the standards; uses direct instruction almost exclusively; and relies heavily on worksheets and pencil/paper tests.	Y1: Below expected growth Y2: Met expected growth Y3: Below expected growth 3-year average: Below expected growth (Y1 and Y3 VA scores are just barely below expected growth.)	Debbie's student and parent survey data are neither exceptionally positive nor negative.
Angela Duncan: seventh-grade math; third-year teacher; Black female	Designated as proficient on all five standards. Angela has strong content knowledge, good pedagogy, and engages students. Her classroom management, time management, and procedures/routines need some work.	Y1: Below expected growth Y2: Below expected growth Y3: Met expected growth 3-year average: Below expected growth	Angela's perceptual data are generally positive. Students find her engaging and caring. Parents find her a bit aloof but also committed.
Mark Donegal: eighth-grade science; 12-year veteran; White male	Designated as developing in <i>establish environment</i> and proficient on all other standards. Mark has high expectations for some students and low expectations for others. He tends to teach to the strong students without providing adequate differentiation. He complains about special needs students.	Y1: (far) Below expected growth Y2: Met expected growth Y3: Met expected growth 3-year average: Below expected growth	While students and parents seem to recognize Mark's strong content knowledge, they see him as sarcastic and intimidating. He is also perceived to have favorites.
Frances Whitlock: eighth-grade ELA; 22-year veteran; White female	Rated accomplished or distinguished on all standards. Frances has high expectations for all students, strong content and pedagogical knowledge, and is one of the strongest teacher leaders in the building. She is deeply reflective about her practice and always open to learning and trying new things.	Y1: (far) Below expected growth Y2: (far) Above expected growth Y3: Met expected growth 3-year average: Below expected growth	Frances is respected by teachers and students alike. Each year a number of parents submit written requests to have their children in Frances' class.

*(continued)*

**Table 2. (continued)**

Teacher	Observation data	VA data	Perceptual/other data
Elena Martinez: seventh- and eighth-grade English Language Learners; 8-year veteran; Latina female	All Elena's ratings are in the proficient, accomplished, and distinguished categories. Elena is well-prepared for class every day, differentiates for student needs, and cares deeply about her students. She has an informal style that her students respond to.	Y1: Below expected growth Y2: Below expected growth Y3: Below expected growth 3-year average: Below expected growth	Elena is loved by her students, who see her as caring and engaging and there to help them with anything. Parents trust her greatly and see her as their advocate.
Walker: General music and band teacher; 12-year veteran; White male	Designated as developing in <i>facilitate learning</i> and <i>reflect on practice</i> . Values tradition in his pedagogy and in his selection of music used in his class. He does not stray from the cannon, students are in rows in his room, and choral singing accompanied by him on the piano is the primary activity in his general music classes. He shuns the use of technology and sees no need to change.	Not Applicable	Walker's perceptual data are among the weakest in the school. Students see Walker as un-engaging and "behind the times." Parents find him detached and uncommunicative.
Ruth Mayhew: seventh-grade ELA; 35-year veteran; White female	Designated as developing in <i>facilitate learning</i> . Ruth does not have rigorous standards and high expectations for students. She coddles students, has a lot of downtime in class, does not use technology, and does not differentiate.	Y1: Met expected growth Y2: Below expected growth Y3: Below expected growth 3-year average: Met expected growth	Students and parents alike perceive Ruth as a nurturing grandmother. While students tend not to take her seriously, they like her, and a number of parents who attended Baker Middle remember Ruth fondly.

Note. VA = value-added; Y1 = Year 1; Y2 = Year 2; Y3 = Year 3; ELA = English/language arts.

After reviewing the data, Ms. Michaels highlights the names of the teachers she will put on the district ISL. She glances at the clock, which reads 7:00 p.m. She closes the folder, stretches her aching shoulders, gathers her things, and glances back at the folder again. This all feels wrong, she thinks. She promises herself,

I'll sleep on it and make a final decision Sunday night. That will give me enough time to speak personally with each of the selected teachers before submitting the list to Moore. Or maybe I won't submit a list to Moore at all,

she thinks with a small smile. Then she shakes her head, sighs one last time, and heads out into the rainy night.

## **Teaching Notes**

Focused on the use of teacher evaluation data, this case was designed for use in two principal licensure courses, one on data literacy and the other on supervision and personnel. The principal of Baker Middle School has been instructed by the superintendent to use data from the state's new teacher evaluation system to determine which teachers should be placed on the district's ISL. Those on the list receive additional support but are subject to termination proceedings if they do not grow sufficiently. Students must analyze available data, identify which teachers should be on the ISL, and defend their decisions or alternatively craft an advocacy plan in objection to the ISL.

### *Supporting Literature*

According to the National Council for Teacher Quality (Doherty & Jacobs, 2013), in 2013, all but 10 states required student growth measures (SGMs) to be included in educator evaluations, reflecting a rare “seismic shift” (p. i) in educator evaluation policy. This change is due to a number of factors, including research that speaks to the profound impact of teacher quality (e.g., Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997), criticism of traditional educator evaluation systems as being inept in discriminating levels of teacher quality (e.g., Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009), and the influence of neoliberal forces, including business and “new philanthropy” (Ball, 2012), such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Measures of Effective Teaching project. These factors undergird the recent use of federal policy levers, including Race to the Top (RttT) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waivers to bring about a new generation of educator evaluations.

New generation educator evaluations that comply with RttT and NCLB waiver requirements include at least three teacher effectiveness levels as well as multiple measures of effectiveness, including data from teacher observations and SGMs. This case involves VA data, which is one type of SGM and the second most common SGM that utilizes standardized test data (after Student Growth Percentiles; Amrein-Beardsley, 2014). There are a number of VAMs, but they all utilize student achievement data from multiple time points to determine student growth. VAMs generally fall into one of two types (Sanders, 2006): One type compares student performance, calculated in terms of normal curve equivalents, at two points in time to determine growth. The other uses past student performance to project a student's future performance. These projections are compared with actual student achievement scores to determine growth. Regardless of which type of VAM is used, individual student growth is aggregated at the teacher level to determine whether a teacher has failed to meet, met, or exceeded expected student growth.

This case focuses on the enactment of policy changes at the local level, specifically how new measures of educator effectiveness are used to inform personnel decisions. Policy enactment often reflects unanticipated and unintended consequences of policy action. In this case, the superintendent has created the ISL, referred to as the “Hit List” by educators. This is an example



of how broad policy action has far-reaching impacts on local education, and it reinforces the importance of educators' roles in enacting policy. This case requires students to view the principal both as a policy actor and as a consumer of educational data.

As a consumer of data, it is imperative to know the strengths and limitations of any data set. Advocates of the use of SGMs argue that SGMs provide an objective measure of teacher effectiveness and focus teacher evaluation on what is most important—student learning. While some experts support the use of VAM for educator evaluation (e.g., Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010), many have grave concerns about the appropriateness of doing so (e.g., American Statistical Association, 2014; Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012), based on issues of validity, instability of the data over time, and possible systematic bias of the measures. Regarding VA, researchers have found that teachers of ELL, Students With Disabilities, and gifted students tend to have lower teacher effectiveness ratings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012), as do schools with high minority and low-income populations (Baker et al., 2010; Bracey, 2004). In addition, VA scores tend to be unstable from year to year, sometimes bouncing substantially (Corcoran, 2010; Haertel, 2013). Knowledge of the strengths and limitations of data measures are important for using those measures sensibly.

Similarly, there are strengths and limitations of observation- and artifact-based appraisals of teacher effectiveness. Strengths include the helpfulness of these measures for providing teachers with specific, actionable feedback on instruction, and the alignment of these measures with what is known about effective instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Limitations include the potential bias of evaluators, the need for high quality training of raters, the extensive time it takes to complete these evaluations, and low reliability of ratings, even under ideal conditions (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013; Ho & Kane, 2013; Lavigne & Good, 2014; Popham, 2013). In addition, evaluations conducted by principals have drawn criticism for not adequately discriminating among teacher effectiveness levels. For example, a study of Chicago schools found that between 2003 and 2006, 87% of the district's schools—including 69 "failing" schools—had issued no "unsatisfactory" teacher ratings (Toch, 2008). That said, findings from the Measures of Effective Teaching project suggest that while principals tend to rate their teachers slightly higher than external raters, principals and external raters tend to rank teachers similarly (Ho & Kane, 2013).

In addition, some states, including Arizona, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, and Massachusetts incorporate student perceptual data into teacher evaluation (Crouse, Joyce, & Gitomer, 2014). Researchers with the Measures of Effective Teaching project found that student survey data (e.g., Tripod Survey) are reliable and can provide meaningful feedback to teachers (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013). Nonetheless, administration of student surveys can be costly and time-consuming, taking away from instructional time. Some policy makers also consider incorporating perceptual data from parents/guardians and teachers' peers into evaluations. Popham (2013) argues that parent ratings of teachers are tantamount to hearsay and that other types of evaluative evidence are more compelling. In addition, Popham argues that peer ratings are also problematic because teachers generally do not have adequate opportunity to observe one another teach, and the potential validity of peer ratings is potentially undermined by "reciprocal back-scratching" (p. 148).

Designing valid and meaningful teacher evaluation systems that can inform personnel decisions and be used to inform teacher development is a challenging feat. Regardless, those who use teacher evaluation data to make decisions must be mindful of the strengths and weaknesses of the various types of data that inform their decisions.

### *Case Exercise*

**Consider:** How should Ms. Michaels respond to the superintendent's mandate to put forth names of teachers for the ISL?

**Respond:** Option A: Using the data provided, identify which Baker Middle School teachers should be on the ISL and make a cogent argument for the inclusion of each. Craft a memo to the Superintendent, from the perspective of Ms. Michaels, explaining how the ISL for Baker was constructed (e.g., upon what the principal's decisions were based and which factors were most influential and why). In identifying teachers for the ISL list, consider: What do you anticipate may be the repercussions at Baker Middle School of Ms. Michaels implementing the ISL? How might she respond to these possible repercussions?

*OR*

Option B: Develop an advocacy plan that Ms. Michaels could enact to speak out about educator evaluation, her views on the ISL, and what she thinks is right for students and teachers. The plan should also include Ms. Michaels' specific ideas for supporting the growth and development of each of *the Baker seven*, based on analysis of the data provided on each. Students may wish to examine ASCD's (2009) Advocacy Guide, available at [http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/publications/advocacyguide\\_2009\\_web.pdf](http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/publications/advocacyguide_2009_web.pdf). In developing the advocacy plan, consider: What do you anticipate may be the implications of the plan? What are the possible repercussions of speaking out against the superintendent's mandate?

### *Discussion Questions*

- What are your thoughts on the use of an ISL?
- Will the use of the ISL improve teaching and learning? Why or why not?
- What are your thoughts on the superintendent's statement regarding her expectations for the % of teachers on the ISL?
- What data types should be included in decisions regarding teacher evaluation? What data types should be used for personnel decisions? Why?
- Given limitations of VA (see "Supporting Literature" section), what are the implications of VA data for decisions regarding teacher evaluation and personnel decisions (e.g., promotion, retention, performance pay, and termination)?
- What advice do you have for Ms. Michaels as she navigates the conflict she feels between following the superintendent's directive to list Baker teachers on the ISL and her concerns that the ISL may undermine morale, exacerbate teacher recruitment and retention issues, and ultimately not improve student learning? How might Ms. Michaels

manage her internal conflict and meet the superintendent's demands? How should the district context inform Ms. Michael's decision about how to respond to Dr. Moore's directive to submit teacher names to the ISL?

- If you could speak before policy makers on what should and should not be included in teacher evaluation and personnel decisions, what would you say? Why? To what extent and in what ways do you think building leaders should serve as policy advocates?

### *Classroom Activities*

1. In class, ask students which of the ways they would like to respond to the case exercise (i.e., Option A: Draft ISL and memo or Option B: Draft advocacy plan).
2. Create homogeneous groups of three to four students based on which option they select.
3. Give groups 45 min to discuss the case and draft their response for either Option A or B.
4. Come back together as a whole group. Each subgroup should report out on its draft. In doing so, groups should engage in informal debate about whether Ms. Michaels should comply with the superintendent's mandate to contribute names to the ISL or engage in some type of advocacy against the mandate. In addition, those groups that put forth names for the list should argue on behalf of their decisions (why they included and excluded specific teachers), and those groups that drafted an advocacy plan should defend it. Thus, this is a multi-level debrief that requires students to advocate what they think *is right* (i.e., comply with the mandate or engage in policy advocacy) and the *right way* to do it (i.e., which names should appear on the list or what advocacy should look like in this situation).

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