

A Counselor's Overwhelming Battle

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Linda Plack is fighting hard to keep a student from dropping out of school.

The boy is Asian, tall and dark-haired, showing the beginning fuzz of a mustache on his lip. He shifts uncomfortably, nervous in the office, too big for the chair. His mother sits beside him, dumpy and tired, wearing a wrinkled pink turtleneck. "He must stay in high school," she whispers in formal, heavily accented English. "He must."

Plack tries. She offers him different types of math, different teachers, striving desperately to pinpoint the problem that is pulling him out of school. There is a sense of a struggle in the office. The boy shakes his head, wanting to leave.

Plack pushes the hair out of her eyes, still fighting. "Maybe algebra isn't right for you," she says. "Maybe you need pre-algebra. Would you like a business class? It would help you if you ever went into business for yourself. Do you like coming to school earlier or later? How do you feel about Mrs. Jones?"

When she explains to him the dangers of going into the world with no diploma, he looks away. To think of this boy going into the world armed only with his hormones and his straggly mustache is a travesty.

"This is your opportunity," she tells him. "This is your life." She tempts him with auto shop, with accounting classes. He wavers, uncertain. When they finally leave, the mother thanks Plack profusely.

Alone, Plack slumps in her seat. This is a battle half-won, one that will have to be fought again and again, with this student alone -- and there are 3,000 of them in the school, with only four counselors to divide the load.

The teachers do what they can. I once saw Mr. Davis standing in the hall outside his English class talking to a boy who shifted from foot to foot uneasily.

"Do you feel like you've learned anything in English the past three years?" Mr. Davis asked, with a note of desperation in his voice.

"No," the boy said.

You can almost hear the doors slamming shut.