

NAME:

DATE:



## DILEMMA DEBATE: EXCELLENCE AT RISK

### 1. READ THE FOLLOWING DILEMMA: EXCELLENCE AT RISK

**Katie is a young woman who has been teaching ninth grade English at a large high school for the past six years. Katie goes out of her way to communicate with parents about students' work in her classroom.**

**Unfortunately, Katie's interest in staying in contact with parents created a very difficult situation in her second year of teaching. She received two death threats in the mail and ultimately found out it was a student whose parents she had contacted because the student had been missing a great number of classes. As a result of Katie's phone calls, the student's parents took disciplinary action, and the student seemed to have responded by sending her teacher threatening messages. Although Katie did not feel a great deal of support from the school administration, she decided to press charges, because she thought that the student would be more likely to learn from the experience as a result.**

---

Katie has been teaching English to ninth graders at a large high school for the past six years. A self-proclaimed hard worker, Katie ultimately wants to make a difference in students' lives and to improve their prospects for the future.

In addition to teaching content, Katie concerns herself with helping students to develop a sense of independence and positive self-esteem. In teaching *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Katie developed a curriculum that veers from many of the more traditional methods her peers use. Rather than focusing on the particular information in the text, she sets out to develop students' reading and writing skills by writing new scenes, acting out these scenes in class, and paraphrasing lines of the text. Through these activities, Katie hopes that students will become more involved with the text and take ownership of their learning. Katie believes that the role of a teacher is to give students skills (not just information) so that they may continue to learn on their own. She feels successful as a teacher when students come back to her, years later, and thank her for her help and guidance.

Katie strives to encourage students to take ownership and feel responsible for their own work in her classroom. She claims that with all

NAME:

DATE:



## DILEMMA DEBATE: EXCELLENCE AT RISK

the concern about standardized tests at the end of the year, many teachers forget that students need to know what they are working towards. Some of her peers are nervous to push students too hard because they don't want students to feel badly about themselves. Katie believes that students will feel good when they engage with rigorous work, learn from it, and then take stock of their individual accomplishments.

Because of her beliefs, Katie has joined the school's Instructional Leadership Team, which involves working with new teachers and planning professional development opportunities at the school. Katie also goes out of her way to communicate with parents about activities in class, even though this is not a formal responsibility in her position. She calls parents and also sends home bi-weekly reports.

Katie's interest in staying in contact with parents created a very difficult situation in her second year of teaching. She describes the situation with one of her students:

*"I received one and then a second death threat in the mail—at school, actually. We didn't really have any proof [at first] on who had done it. It was the middle of my second year. But I really had an idea of who it was, and the school police investigated their locker and it was just pretty obvious [that it was her]. It was a student who—actually, we were getting along fine and I, as her homeroom teacher, had to call her home any time she was absent. And when I called [and told her parents]... [they knew] that she had been skipping school... So she blamed the whole thing on me... It was my decision if I wanted to press charges or not [for the death threats]... That was definitely an ethical dilemma because part of me felt like, now I'm putting this person into the justice system. But another part of me felt like I need to do this for myself. She did do something really wrong, and she needs to realize it's wrong, but I was really torn."*

In the end, Katie felt that the student would learn from the experience if she actually pressed charges. As a result of this decision, the student ended up working with another English teacher and homeroom teacher,

NAME:

DATE:



## DILEMMA DEBATE: EXCELLENCE AT RISK

and eventually graduated from the school. As Katie explained, *"[the student] stayed all four years. She was a decent student ... [who went through] a phase ... But I really didn't honestly communicate with her after that. I saw her all the time and I knew how she was doing."* Interestingly, when asked how she might have handled the situation differently if it happened now, Katie responded that she would not take the threat "as personally".

### 2. YOUR TEACHER WILL ASSIGN YOU TO A GROUP AND A "PART" TO PLAY. PLEASE CHECK OFF YOUR ASSIGNED ROLE BELOW.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Katie                        | <input type="checkbox"/> A friend of Katie's           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Katie's student              | <input type="checkbox"/> Another teacher at the school |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The student's parents        | <input type="checkbox"/> A police officer              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Another student in the class |  |

### 3. SPEND 10 MINUTES DEBATING AND DISCUSSING THE DILEMMA WITH YOUR GROUP FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF YOUR ASSIGNED PARTS.

### 4. NEXT, YOUR TEACHER WILL SHUFFLE THE ROLES. AS BEFORE, SPEND 10 MINUTES DEBATING AND DISCUSSING THE DILEMMA AS A GROUP FROM YOUR NEW ROLES.

### 5. COME BACK TOGETHER AS A CLASS TO DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING:

- What did you notice in your role play? Did you all agree (alignment)? Were there disagreements (misalignment)?
- Did your perspective change between your first and your second role?
- What does Katie value? What is important to her?
- What are the ways that the situation could end? Does one ending feel more "just" to you than another?

NAME:

DATE:



## DILEMMA DEBATE: EXCELLENCE AT RISK

6. LOOK AT THE INFORMATION IN TOTALITY AND JOT DOWN YOUR VOTE ON WHAT YOU THINK KATIE SHOULD DO (REPORT THE STUDENT, NOT REPORT THE STUDENT, OR ANY OTHER ALTERNATIVE CHOICES THAT MAY HAVE BEEN RAISED).

BE PREPARED TO SHARE A FEW POINTS OF JUSTIFICATION.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Remember, this dilemma is a real case. There is no perfect right answer. In these types of situations it's important to keep in mind that what we "should" do is a complex interplay of:

Values  
Responsibilities  
Considering who is affected and how

It is important to use these same habits of reflection when encountering difficult situations in real life. When we face a dilemma, we should pause before making a decision to consider:

- All of the stakeholders (people who could be affected)
- Your personal values (what is important to me?)
- Your responsibilities (to yourself, to your communities, to society)
- "Good work" (excellence, ethics, and engagement)