

# The Maze

## Avoiding Burnout in the Bureaucracy

### Case Overview

#### Background

Teacher: Ms. Fran Itok  
Experience: 2 Years  
Class: 3rd/4th Grade



#### Storyline

Fran Itok is in her second year of teaching a 3rd/4th multigrade class. She is an energetic and highly organized teacher who invests considerable time and effort into designing meaningful instruction for her students. Just before the completion of a poetry unit, Fran learns that a famous actress will be reading poetry at the local public library. Excited about this unique educational opportunity, Fran arranges for her class to attend this presentation as the culminating experience for the unit. Since she is new to organizing field trips, she meticulously follows the policy manual on requesting bus transportation. She sends her request via school mail. Unfortunately, a bureaucratic glitch occurs, and the transportation office never receives her request for the bus. Frustrated by the idea of disappointing her students with the news that the field trip might be canceled, Fran attempts to work her way through the maze of bureaucracy in an effort to preserve what she anticipates will be a powerful learning experience.

#### Star Teacher Function: Avoiding Burnout in the Bureaucracy

Some key beliefs and behaviors that comprise this function are:

- ❑ Star teachers are aware that they work in bureaucracies that often appear to better meet the needs of the bureaucracy itself rather than the needs of students and teachers.
- ❑ Star teachers adjust to these large bureaucracies and accept what they cannot change.
- ❑ Star teachers continue to teach despite the innumerable interruptions and distractions imposed by bureaucratic needs and demands.
- ❑ Star teachers are able to figure out what parts of the bureaucratic structure to ignore so they can devote most of their time and energy to teaching.
- ❑ Star teachers learn the informal bureaucracy of the school system and find ways to use it to benefit children.
- ❑ Star teachers use the support of other teachers within their school and throughout the district to counteract burnout that so often occurs in large bureaucratic systems.

For a more detailed description of this function, see pages 60-68 in *Star Teachers of*

*Children in Poverty* (Haberman 1995), which accompanies this series.

## **Other Topics and Issues**

Although the main purpose of *The Maze* is to stimulate reflection on the star teacher function of *avoiding burnout in the bureaucracy*, the case provides the opportunity for examining other issues and topics as well. These include multi-grade classrooms, use of community resources, use of rewards for good classwork, planning field trips, and dealing with daily interruptions in the classroom.

## **Scene Summaries and Questions**

### **Scene 1: A Thursday in April. Fran's 3rd/4th Grade Class.**

**Summary:** It is Thursday, and Fran's students are reading the poetry that they have been writing. There are three interruptions, one from the intercom, the second from the school secretary, and the third from a colleague reminding Fran of cafeteria duty. Two groups of students have read their poems, but the last child is unable to finish because of lunch. As class ends, Fran reminds the children to be sure to bring in their permission slips for the library field trip on Monday.

### **Possible Questions:**

1. Is there any way for Fran to minimize the impact of these interruptions to her class?
2. What other alternatives does she have for dealing with these interruptions?
3. (TQ) What are some of the possible reasons Fran has not received confirmation of her field trip request?

### **Scene 2: Later the Same Day. Main Office.**

**Summary:** Fran stops by the office to check with Mrs. Griffin, the school secretary, on the status of the field trip bus request. Mrs. Griffin explains that she has called downtown and that the transportation office has no record of Fran's request. Fran shows the secretary her copy of the request form and shares that she sent it via school mail. The secretary recommends that the next time Fran confer with someone experienced in how the system works. Fran's conversation with the secretary is interrupted several times by other demands on the secretary's time. Mrs. Griffin ends by saying she cannot help Fran because there is not enough time before the field trip.

### **Possible Questions:**

1. Have you experienced similar frustrations with procedural foul-ups in the school bureaucracy?
2. (TQ) What should Fran do now?

**Scene 3: Moments Later. Principal's Office.**

**Summary:** Fran pursues assistance from her principal, Mr. Newman. The principal calls the transportation department and discovers that the new bus drivers' contract prevents them from making any last-minute arrangements for field trips. Mr. Newman informs Fran that he has done everything he can do.

**Possible Questions:**

1. What else might Mr. Newman have done to assist Fran?
2. What would your dominant feeling be if you found yourself in Fran's predicament?
3. (TQ) What should Fran do now?

**Scene 4: The Same Day After School. District's Transportation Office.**

**Summary:** Fran continues her journey through the bureaucratic maze by going to the district's transportation office. Her first encounter is with an outer-office secretary who lets her know that she is well aware of her problem, having had to deal with it twice already. In response to Fran's evidence that she did indeed file her form on time, the secretary makes it clear that there is nothing she can do because her office never received the request.

**Possible Questions:**

1. (TQ) What should Fran do now?

**Scene 5: Moments Later. Transportation Director's Office.**

**Summary:** Fran convinces the secretary to allow her to speak with the Mr. York, the Director of Transportation. Mr. York responds that there are procedures to follow and that her principal should be dealing with this problem. After checking some paperwork, he informs Fran that Garfield Elementary has already exhausted its budget line for field trips. Even if his office had received the form, he would not have been able to assist her since Garfield's budget for field trip transportation has been overspent.

**Possible Questions:**

1. What dominant feelings might you have at this point in time?
2. (TQ) What should Fran do now?

**Scene 6: The Next Morning. Teachers' Workroom.**

**Summary:** The next morning before school, Fran talks to a colleague, Ellen, about her experience with the field trip and acknowledges that she is going to have to cancel the trip. Ellen suggests that perhaps parents could drive the children. If that doesn't work out, Ellen advises Fran to "let the kids down easy by substituting a video or having the librarian read the poetry."

**Possible Questions:**

1. Respond to Ellen's statement, "This system does not care about teachers or kids."
2. Do you agree with Ellen's advice to Fran that "This is not your problem anymore."

3. (TQ) What would you do if you were Fran?

**Scene 7: Forty-Five Minutes Later. 3rd/4th Grade Class.**

**Summary:** The child who was interrupted the day before when reading a poem finishes reading his poetry. Fran then shares with the children that the field trip has to be canceled because of a “glitch” that happened. The children express their disappointment and suggest walking to the library. Fran responds positively to this idea.

**Possible Questions:**

1. How did Fran handle the intercom interruption? Would this approach work for you in your class?
2. (TQ) The children are visibly disappointed. What should Fran do? Or, has she done enough?

**Scene 8: Lunch Break. Fran’s Classroom.**

**Summary:** Fran lunches with her mentor, Dorothy Porter, and vents her frustrations about the field trip disaster. Dorothy supports Fran’s efforts to make it happen despite the bureaucracy and suggests calling the actress scheduled to perform at the library to ask if she would be willing to come to the school to read the poetry. Fran quickly discounts the idea, saying she would feel uncomfortable calling a famous actress, especially at the last minute to make such a request. Dorothy then advises Fran that “Kids have to learn to deal with disappointments, even at this age.”

**Possible Questions:**

1. (TQ) What are your reactions to Dorothy’s suggestions. Were there particular ideas you feel Fran should try?

**Scene 9: The Following Monday. 3rd/4th Grade Class.**

**Summary:** Fran’s children ask if they are going to the library. Fran tells the children that they are unable to walk because of a districtwide policy that limits the distance elementary-age children can walk. She compliments the work they have done with the unit and ends with, “Good things come to those who work hard.” She tells the children that Mrs. Porter had suggested she call the actress to see if she would come to their class. Fran explains that she was reluctant to follow the advice but eventually decided to make the call because they had worked so hard on the unit. And, “Do you know what the actress said?” At this point, Aurelia Blake, the actress, enters the classroom saying, “I would love to come.” Aurelia proceeds to share poetry, to the delight of the children.

**Possible Questions:**

How and why was Fran able to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles she confronted?

# The Maze Video Case Transcript



## Scene 1: A Thursday in April. Fran's 3rd/4th Grade Class.

**Fran:** Okay, guys, now it is time for us to read aloud the poems we have been working on. Now, what I need you to do is listen carefully to each other in your groups so you read as one voice. And, so everybody can hear us, don't put your papers over your faces when you are reading to an audience. So, Group One, are you ready? Come on up.

**Students:** *(A group of students come to the front of the room and begin to recite a poem. They are just getting started when they are interrupted by the intercom.)*

**Intercom:** Students and teachers, please excuse the interruption, but today when you are boarding the bus, Bus 23 will now be Bus 21. Bus 23 is in the shop. So when boarding the bus please use 21. Thank you.

**Fran:** Okay, Thank you. Okay, guys, let's go back to work.

**Students:** I am the dance step of the paintbrush singing. I am the sculpture of the song, the flame breath of words giving new life to paper. Yes, I am created to be . .

**Bing-Bing:** *(reciting the poem "I Love the Look of Words" by Maya Angelou)*  
I love the look of words.  
Popcorn leaps popping from the floor of a  
hot black skillet and into my mouth.  
Black words leap, snapping from the...

**Secretary:** *(after knocking at the door and interrupting the class)* Hi, I need your attendance and your lunch count.

**Fran:** Oh, gosh, I'm sorry.

**Secretary:** Thank you. Oh, don't forget your inventory this afternoon. I have to have it.

**Fran:** Okay. Oh, by the way, can you check about the bus for our field trip on Monday?

**Secretary:** Okay, I will check about that.

**Fran:** Okay, thanks! Why don't you start from the beginning please, Bing-Bing.

**Bing-Bing:** I love the look of words. Popcorn leaps popping from the floor of a hot black skillet and into my mouth. Black words leap, snapping from the white page rushing into my eyes

**Another Teacher:** *(entering the room and interrupting)* I'm sorry to interrupt, but don't you have cafeteria duty today?

**Fran:** I'm sorry. Okay, Bing-Bing, I'm sorry we're not going to be able to finish this right now.

**Bing-Bing:** *(disappointed and protesting)* Oh, no...

**Fran:** Tomorrow, tomorrow okay? Guys, I have lunch duty. You know what that means. Don't forget to get your permission slips in for our field trip on Monday. You have to have them tomorrow, or you can't go. Okay, line up quietly. Push those chairs in. Shh.



## Scene 2: Later the Same Day. Main Office.

**Fran:** Hi, Mrs. Griffin, I came down to check on the bus for the field trip on Monday.

**Mrs. Griffin:** *(the school secretary)*. Well, I called downtown as soon as you told me about it, and they have absolutely no paperwork on your field trip. They haven't heard anything about it.

**Fran:** Now, wait a minute. I looked all this up in the policy manual. I went through it step by step. Here's my transportation ... *(Phone rings.)*

**Mrs. Griffin:** Hold on just a minute. Garfield Elementary, good afternoon. I'll have to look that up, can you hold a minute please?

**Fran:** Here's my transportation form. See it's dated last month. I sent it in more than a month ago, that's plenty of time for the 20 days.

**Mrs. Griffin:** How did you send it?

**Fran:** Well, I sent it through school mail.

**Mrs. Griffin:** That was your first mistake. Things normally get lost through school mail. The best thing for you to do when you are doing a field trip is either bring it...

**Evan:** *(a student)* Hi, can I please have the keys to the music room?

**Mrs. Griffin:** Sure, Evan, here you go. The best thing is to bring it to me. I'll hand carry it. Send it through U.S. mail, the post office, or you can hand carry it. But, with interoffice mail you'll be lucky if it gets to them.

*(Phone rings.)*

**Mrs. Griffin:** *(answering the phone)* Garfield Elementary, good afternoon. I'll make sure she gets that message. Uh-huh, goodbye.

**Fran:** Well, do you have any suggestions? What should I do? They didn't get this. Can I hand carry it down there now? I mean, this is supposed to be the culminating thing for our entire poetry unit. It's supposed to be their big reward for all the work they've done.

**Mrs. Griffin:** Hmm, yeah, at the moment I don't know what to tell you because you're not going to make the deadline now for your field trip. just a minute.



### Scene 3: Moments Later. Principal's Office.

**Fran:** Hi, Mr. Newman.

**Mr. Newman:** *(the school principal)* Yes, Ms. Itok.

**Fran:** Well, you know, I've been talking to Mrs. Griffin about our field trip that is coming up that I had scheduled. It's the one to the Kennedy Library. Well, even though I sent in my transportation form a month ago, I wasn't able to get a bus for the field trip because I guess it was lost in the shuffle in the school mail. Is there anything at all we can do about this?

**Mr. Newman:** Yes, let me call Mrs. Green in the transportation office and see if they can give us any more information on this *(dialing number)*. Yes, may I speak with Mrs. Green. This is Mr. Newman at Garfield Elementary. Hello, Mrs. Green, this is Mr. Newman. I'm calling in regard to a field trip request for Mrs. Itok. She had requested to go to the Kennedy Library, and she hasn't received any confirmation, so we would like to know the status of the field trip. Okay, I see.... uh huh ... all right, thank you *(after hanging up the phone)*. Well, Mrs. Itok, it appears that the bus drivers have a new contract, and they require three working days notice prior to talking any field trips; and since your field trip is on Monday, there is not enough time. So you're out of luck.

**Fran:** I did my part. I did what I was supposed to do. I sent it in on time and I used the school mail, which is what they said in the policy manual. The kids are going to be so disappointed.

**Mr. Newman:** Can you reschedule it?

**Fran:** No, because the actress that is going to be reading the poetry is only going to be there that one day. It's a one-time event.

**Mr. Newman:** I see. Well I've done everything I can. I don't know what else to do. I'm sorry.



## **Scene 4: The Same Day After School. District's Transportation Office.**

**Fran:** *(at the school district's transportation office)* Hi, I'm Fran Itok from Garfield Elementary, and I came here to talk to you about a field trip we had scheduled for Monday at Kennedy Library. Here, this is my transportation form.

**Secretary:** *(of the transportation office)* Yes. I have dealt with this problem twice today already. The principal has called, the secretary has called. I can't help you.

**Fran:** Well, you see on my form that it is dated correctly. I sent it in on time through school mail, but it must have gotten lost. I was hoping maybe there was some way we could coordinate bus transportation for Monday.

**Secretary:** I don't care if you have a hundred copies of that form. I never received one, and I suggest you take it up with the interoffice mail.



## Scene 5: Moments Later. Transportation Director's Office.

- Fran:** *(in the office of the Director of Transportation)* I came to see you about a problem I'm having getting transportation for a field trip on Monday to Kennedy Library. Here, let me look this up real quick. Here is my transportation form which I sent through school mail. It must have gotten lost, I guess, in the shuffle, although it was sent more than a month ago. I guess your office never received its copy. I'm trying to check into this because of this glitch. Is there any way we could get a bus for Monday so my children can still go on this field trip? It's really important to them. They've worked really hard on the unit that has led up to this field trip.
- Mr. York:** *(Director of Transportation).* Well, I don't normally deal with this. I mean this is handled by the building principals. You're name again is Etok *(mispronouncing her name)*?
- Fran:** Mrs. Itok, from Garfield Elementary.
- Mr. York:** Mrs. Ikok, *(mispronouncing her name again)* yes, from Garfield. Okay, and what is your principal's name?
- Fran:** Mr. Newman.
- Mr. York:** And did he take care of this?
- Fran:** Well, he did call over to your office for me this afternoon, and then I came downtown by myself to see if there was anything I could do to get the ball rolling on this. Maybe we could coordinate a bus somehow.
- Mr. York:** Well, you know, I hate to disappoint you but, I mean, we have procedures that we have to follow. And, besides the form ... Garfield's

number is ... okay. Newman, Newman's your principal (*referring to some paperwork*)?

**Fran:** Yes.

**Mr. York:** His requests for field trips are in the red. He already has a minus in front of this. He has already over expended his budget by almost \$1,400 for field trips.

**Fran:** Does this mean we are not able to schedule any more field trips for the year?

**Mr. York:** Well, my point is, even if you would have sent this in, I don't disbelieve you, but even if my office had this form, even as you now suggest, look he has a \$1,400 deficit in his transportation fund for field trips. So, we couldn't approve it for him anyway. He would send it down here, and we would send it back and say it's expended. So, I don't think we can help you with that.



## **Scene 6: The Next Morning. Teacher's Workroom.**

**Ellen:**           *(a teacher)* Thank goodness, it's Friday.

**Fran:**            I dread this Friday, this is terrible.

**Ellen:**            Why? What's the matter?

**Fran:**            You know the poetry field trip I had scheduled for my class? We were going to the library to see that actress read some of the poems we've been studying. I have to cancel it.

**Ellen:**            What happened?

**Fran:**            Well, I sent in my transportation form in plenty of time but somehow it must have gotten lost in the shuffle and I wasn't able to get a bus for the field trip.

**Ellen:**            Franny, I'm so sorry.

**Fran:**            The kids are going to be so disappointed. They worked so hard on this unit. I went everywhere. I mean I found out what went wrong with the form. I went everywhere begging people, "Can we go on this field trip?" I went downtown to the transportation office. Did you know that we're out of field trips here at Garfield? I felt like such a fool.

**Ellen:**            Well, maybe you could get the parents to drive.

**Fran:**            Most of their parents work, and most don't have cars, and I'm not taking all those kids on the subway.

**Ellen:**            You know, I really think you are letting this thing get to you, and you

just can't let that happen. I mean, enough is enough. You've done everything you can do, and the sooner that you learn that this system just does not care about teachers or kids, the better. There's a lot of things I used to do that I just don't do anymore, and field trips is one of them. Want a suggestion? Let the kids down easy, and then give them a video or an extra recess. Hey, how about getting the librarian to read that poetry? Okay, then, put this whole mess behind you. I mean you've done everything you can, and it's just not your problem anymore.



## **Scene 7: Forty-Five Minutes Later. 3rd/4th Grade Class.**

*(A student finishes reading a poem.)*

**Fran:** Great! Okay, guys. Wow, that's everybody. Okay, that is everybody's poems. You guys did such a good job on reading together, on listening to each other, and also listening to the poems and the words. We learned a lot on this unit. Don't you think?

**Students:** Yeah.

**Fran:** Okay, now I know we had a really special thing planned on Monday going to the library and listening ...

**Intercom:** Excuse me. May I have your attention, please. I have a white Chevrolet license number TXT-061 parked in the bus loading zone. it will be towed immediately if not moved. TXT-061. Thank you.

**Fran:** Thank you. That isn't any of you guys is it? Okay, I'm really sorry, and I know it's bad news. I wasn't able to get a bus for our field trip on Monday, so we won't be ...

**Students:** What!!

**Fran:** I know you guys are disappointed. You've worked so hard... I know. I know I have everybody's permission slips. Look, I'm sorry about this. It was a little glitch. These things do happen, and I'm trying to think of other ideas. How many people maybe have parents that could drive? Well, how many people who have parents who are working on Monday? That's what I thought. You know, it's Friday already, and it's a little late for them to get off of work, so I don't think we could arrange that. I was thinking maybe instead we could have a special video or

something like that.

*(Students protest and express their disappointment.)*

**Student:** Why can't we walk?

**Others:** Yeah, it's not that far.

**Fran:** I hadn't thought of that. Actually, that's a pretty good idea.



## Scene 8: Lunch Break. Fran's Classroom

**Dorothy:** *(Fran's mentor)* Hi, Fran.

**Fran:** Oh, hi, Dorothy, thanks so much for coming.

**Dorothy:** Oh, you're welcome.

**Fran:** I really enjoy these lunches together.

**Dorothy:** I do, too.

**Fran:** It means a lot to me, to get some sanity and quiet times. Oh, and I have to tell you, this has been such a week. It's just too much. Do you remember the poetry field trip that I told you about that our class was planning for Monday?

**Dorothy:** I do. In fact, the kids have been so excited about the poetry. You know, they've been coming down and reading their poems to me.

**Fran:** Great! Well they've worked so hard on this unit.

**Dorothy:** And your field trip's coming up soon, right?

**Fran:** It was supposed to be coming up pretty soon. It was supposed to be Monday, but I had to cancel it.

**Dorothy:** Why? What happened? The kids have got to be crushed. Oh, they are so disappointed. They have worked so hard on this unit. You wouldn't believe all the stuff I had to go through. Well, for one thing I sent in my transportation form 30 days ago. Well within the limit. It got lost. I sent

it through school mail. I should have used the U.S. mail. I should have walked it through myself I went to all these offices. I talked to everybody in the world. Nobody could help me. Well, then I thought maybe I could ask parents to drive, but I found out so late and everybody's parents work or, you know, it's just too difficult. They don't have cars, so we couldn't do that. You know what the kids said? "Let's walk." So I checked into that, and I found out that there is a districtwide policy that forbids elementary students from walking more than a mile from the school. And of course the library is a mile and a half. So no field trip.

**Dorothy:** You've done everything you possibly could. What more could you do? I know, why don't you get on the phone and call the actress? Ask her to schedule a field trip into your classroom.

**Fran:** Oh, Dorothy, come on. I am going to call up Aurelia Blake and say, "My class would like you to come in and read some poems to us"?

**Dorothy:** You know, you've done everything you possibly could. I know the kids are disappointed, and I know that you're disappointed, but kids have to learn to deal with disappointments, even at this age. You've really done a good job. I think you just need to relax. Let it go. Okay? Just have a good weekend.

**Fran:** Thanks. Thanks a lot. Recess duty?

**Dorothy:** Yea

**Fran:** Ugh, let's go



## **Scene 9: The Following Monday. 3rd/4th Grade Class.**

**Class:** *(comes in asking, "Do we get to go to the library today?")*

**Fran:** Well, about our field trip to the library, as you know I wasn't able to get a bus; and I asked about walking, but I found out that there is a districtwide policy that prevents elementary school students, which is what we are, from walking more than a mile from the school, and the library is a mile and a half. So we weren't allowed to walk that distance. Okay?

**Class:** *(protesting)*

**Fran:** I know it doesn't seem that far to you guys, but it is far away, and it's a districtwide policy. It's for your safety. Okay? They're not doing it to be mean. It's for your safety. But I'll tell you something else. You guys have worked so hard on this unit, and I am so proud of all the good work that you did. You know that good things come to those who work hard, and so I was talking to Mrs. Porter, and do you know what she said to me? She said to me on Friday, "Well, why don't you call up the actress that is going to read those poems at the library and ask if she would like to come and read the poems to your class?" And I said, "This is a famous actress, she can't come to our class and read poems. She has a lot of things to do. It's a busy day, she is only going to be in town just this one day." And do you know what? I called up this famous actress Ms. Aurelia Blake and I asked her. Well, first I told her that I have this class that has worked so hard on their poetry unit. You should hear them read. "They're wonderful, and they love all the poems, and you are going to be reading some of the poems that we studied." And I said, "I just wanted to know, would you like to come to my class and read these poems to my wonderful students?" And do you know what she said?

**Aurelia:** *(making a dramatic entrance into the room)* “I would love to come.”

**Fran:** Ms. Aurelia Blake.

**Aurelia:** Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for inviting me. You know, I come to cities all the time—all kinds of places—and give readings in great halls or auditoriums, but I rarely get invited to come to a classroom where people are alive and excited about the works of great poets. This is wonderful. I am going to share with you today some poems that I like. I am going to read a poem by Maya Angelou. It’s called, “I Love the Look of Words.”

Popcorn leaps popping from the floor  
of a hot black skillet and into my mouth.  
Black words leap snapping from the white pages.