

Math Rashes



The playground was gone. Overnight it had disappeared under a foot of snow as white and flat as a birthday cake. Mr. Leeks, the custodian, was the only person on the playground before school



started. He was shoveling the front sidewalk with a wide, curved shovel. The air was cold and snappy. The morning sun sprayed sparkles over the new white world.

At eight-thirty two yellow buses rolled into view. They stopped in front of the school, spraying slush across the sidewalk. The bus doors folded open, and out leaped whooping children, wrapped in knitted caps, thick coats, and rubber boots.

How inviting the snowy playground looked! The students were eager to make snow forts, snow tunnels, and snow angels where only yesterday asphalt and grass had been.

The Playground Lady, however, stood between the buses. Her hands were stuffed into the pockets of a long, quilted coat. The Bad-News Whistle was stuffed between her lips.

Treeeeeeeeeep! the whistle blasted.

“The buses were late today, so head straight inside!” the Playground Lady roared. “Hurry! Hurry! The bell has already rung.”

The students plodded into the school. *Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!* One by one they veered from the hallway into their classrooms.

The third-graders headed to the end of the hall. They entered the room cautiously. After hanging up their wraps in the coat closet, they stepped timidly to their seats.

A new person stood by the blackboard. A young woman. A substitute. A teacher who didn't know

the classroom rules, the daily routine, or even the students' names.

The substitute was facing the blackboard. Her brown ponytail swayed as she wrote her name in chalk. She wore a red bow in her hair. When she turned she smiled at the class with bright red lips.

“Good morning, kids. My name is Miss Givings,” the sub said. “Your teacher is sick today, and I’m so excited to be here. I just finished my student teaching, and this is my first job as a substitute. You kids are my very first class.”

Richard grinned, Danny groaned, Andrew began doodling, and Hari said a short prayer about no homework.

Miss Givings took attendance and checked the tall teacher’s lesson plan book. “Now, kids, we have lots of schoolwork to do today. Just because you have a substitute doesn’t mean anything will be different. First, will you take out your reading books?”

Desktops opened. The class took one last longing look out the window before reading began.

The story was dull, with few pictures, little conversation, and no funny parts. Even worse, the substitute kept interrupting readers by asking, “What does that word mean? Who can explain that sentence? Why do you think that happened?”

Next came handwriting. “Today your teacher wants us to practice writing the hump letters,” said the substitute. “Cursive *n*’s, *m*’s, and *h*’s all have humps.”



So the third-graders wrote cursive *n*'s, *m*'s, and *h*'s over and over until their fingers ached.

Math followed. "Mathematics is a very important subject, kids," Miss Givings said. "Think of all the math you must do if you go shopping. Think of the careers that will require math when you grow up."

For the next half-hour the class plowed through twenty long subtraction problems with lots of crossing out and borrowing from the thousands place.

"My mom uses a calculator and credit card when she shops," Morgan muttered.

"I'm going to be a soccer player when I grow up," Danny grumbled. "Why do soccer players need to know math?"

All this time the snow beckoned outside the window. Squirming in their seats, the class yearned to go outside and play. Mimi's eyes wandered toward the playground, causing her to write her ones in the tens place. George studied the snowdrift under the windowsill and leaned closer until he nearly fell from his chair.

After math, hope rose when Miss Givings turned toward the window. "Well, kids, doesn't the snow outside look wonderful?" she said. "Think of all the fun you could have in the snow. You could go sledding, skiing, or snowboarding. You could build snowmen, snow tunnels, or snow forts."

The third-graders sat on the edge of their seats, ready to spring to the coat closet.

But instead of releasing her students, the sub



picked up some writing paper. “So this morning for creative writing we’ll write snow stories,” she said. “Your title should be ‘Wonderful Snow.’ Now, kids, put on your thinking caps and begin to write. Have fun and let’s be creative.”

This was too much. At the moment the snow was not wonderful. Inches beyond the glass it was teasing the class, crisp, powdery, and sparkling in the sunlight.

Mimi chewed on her pencil. Richard snarled, ready to call a student strike right there and then. Even Kate, the best writer in the class, couldn’t think of a kind word to write about snow.

The substitute strolled up and down the rows of desks, handing out paper. “Don’t forget to use the proper story heading,” she instructed. “And keep within the margins.”



As Miss Givings gave a writing sheet to George, the boy raised a hand to his mouth. *Hic! Hic! Hic!* he went. *Hic! Hic! Hic!* he went again. George had the hiccups.

The substitute checked the seating chart. “George, go to the sink and get a drink of water. Swallow nine times. That’s a hiccup cure I learned while student teaching.”

George walked to the sink. He slurped some water, gulping once, twice ... three, four, five, six, seven, eight ... nine times. *Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic!* But he was still hiccuping.

Now Kate, who sat behind George, started to hiccup as well. She held a hand to her lips and looked toward the sub.

“Get a drink, Kate,” Miss Givings said. “And remember, swallow nine times.”

Kate slurped, gulped, and counted as George had done. Yet she too—*Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic!*—continued to hiccup.

The substitute stopped passing out papers. “How odd,” she said. “That hiccup cure has never failed before. Are you sure you each swallowed nine times, not eight or ten?”

George and Kate nodded and hiccuped some more.

At this point *Hic! Hic! Hic!* erupted from Gabrielle in the fourth row, and *Hic! Hic! Hic!* came from Danny sitting catty-corner from her.

Mimi’s hand flew into the air. “Miss Givings,

whenever I get the hiccups, my mom tells me to hold my breath and count to one hundred.”

George, Kate, Gabrielle, Danny, and Morgan, who was now hiccuping also, sucked in some air and counted. But—*Hic! Hic! Hic!*—this cure worked no better.

“Miss Givings, I read that you should breathe into a paper bag,” Hari suggested. “Don’t use a plastic bag. Only paper, in and out, in and out.”

By now, five more third-graders had the hiccups. They each found a paper lunch bag in the coat closet and began blowing into it.

Meanwhile, Richard sneaked up behind two hiccupers. “Boo!” he shouted. “Boo! Boo!”

They jumped an inch.

“Did I spook you? Did I?” Richard asked. “Scaring people always makes hiccups go away.” Then he crept around the classroom startling anyone he could.

Miss Givings leaned against the teacher’s desk, shaking her head. “How odd. The hiccups seem to be spreading around the room,” she said. “If I didn’t know better I’d say they were contagious. What can I do? I never learned about contagious hiccups in teachers’ college.”

Joey in the first row called out, “I saw a sure cure for hiccups on TV, Miss Givings. Everybody should hop up and down and twirl at the same time.”

Andrew disagreed. “The newspaper said that the best way to get rid of hiccups is to stand on your head.”



While some third-graders hopped and twirled, others did headstands. Some continued to gulp water and others held their breath. Yet, despite all these sure cures, every student in the classroom at the end of the hall soon had the hiccups.

Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic! The classroom sounded like popcorn popping in a pan.

Danny held his middle. "I've been hiccuping so much my gut aches," he complained.

Morgan flopped into her chair. "I don't know which is more exhausting, hiccuping or the hiccup cures," she said.

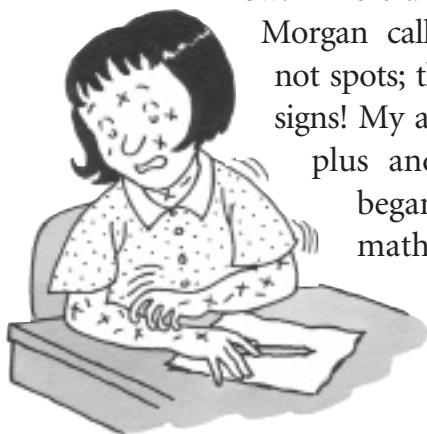
The substitute checked the lesson plan book. "But you kids must stop hiccuping," she said. "We still have stories to write. We must do our vocabulary, social studies, S.S.R., and read our *Weekly Readers*."

Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic! the third-graders answered, louder than before.

At this point a scream came from the fourth row. "There are spots on my arms,"

Morgan called out. "No, they're not spots; they're plus and minus signs! My arms are covered with plus and minus signs!"

She began scratching the red math symbols that covered her hands and arms. The odd rash quickly spread over her neck and face.



“Spots are on my arms too,” Hari suddenly called out. “They’re numbers! *Hic! Hic! Hic!* Miss Givings, I’m covered with the numbers zero to nine!”

Soon afterward Kate announced, “Yikes! Now I have red spots on my arms! They’re times and division signs! And numbers! Yikes! Entire math problems are breaking out all over me!”

Miss Givings sat on her desktop. “How odd! Math Rashes!” she exclaimed. “During student teaching I learned what to do about bee stings, mosquito bites, and poison ivy bumps, but never about Math Rashes.”

By now most of the third-graders had slumped in their seats, exhausted, heads still bouncing with hiccups. Danny scratched some equal signs on his forehead, and Richard scratched the decimal points on his belly.

The substitute walked up and down the aisles, examining her students as a doctor might her patients. “Hiccups and Math Rashes. Hiccups and Math Rashes,” she said over and over. “This can mean only one thing—an allergy. Kids, I believe you’ve had an allergic reaction to something, something in this classroom. But what could it be? You haven’t eaten anything. You haven’t touched anything. How can we cure this allergy and get back to our schoolwork?”

Hic! Hic! Hic! Hic!

Mimi’s hand went up. “Miss Givings, I think the allergy has something to do with schoolwork,”



she called out. “Whenever you mention it, I hiccup more.”

“And my Math Rash itches worse,” said Andrew, scratching the fractions on the back of his neck.

Miss Givings raised a hand to her chin. “Yes, yes, I see what you mean.” As an experiment she suddenly announced, “Time for a pop math quiz, kids!”

Hic! Hic! Hic! More hiccups and scratching.

“Yes, that explains it,” the substitute said. “That’s what’s causing your hiccups and Math Rashes, all right. I believe this entire class has become allergic to, of all things, schoolwork! Yes, this is a Schoolwork Allergy. I’ve given you an overdose of schoolwork this morning, haven’t I? You’ve had too much reading, too much writing, and especially too much arithmetic. So you all broke out in Math Rashes. Isn’t that right? Oh, there’s so much about teaching I still need to learn, kids, but I think I know a cure for this allergy.” Here Miss Givings looked out the window again. “Your next assignment is to go outside in the snow and play. Now, no arguing about it. No more schoolwork for now. Put on your wraps at once and march straight to the playground.”

Within minutes the third-graders were outside in the glorious snow. Soon the playground resembled the cratered surface of the moon. The students built snow forts and supplied them with snowballs. They dropped on their backs to make snow angels and stomped around the soccer field writing their names in giant letters.



Miss Givings, wrapped in a short red coat, red beret, and striped scarf, stood by the jungle gym. She packed a snowball and started rolling it toward the center of the playground. When it was the size of a globe, two third-graders helped push it until it stood taller than they were. Now the entire class joined in. They rolled another boulder slightly smaller than the first, then another smaller still. Soon they were standing around the tallest snowman W. T. Melon Elementary School had ever seen. It wore a red scarf and red beret.

“Is everyone having a good time, kids?” the substitute called out. “This play should cure your Schoolwork Allergy. Isn’t it fun out here? I think I’ll enjoy being a teacher very much. Does everyone feel better now?”



The class answered with whoops and cheers. And not once during the entire recess time did anyone hear a single hiccup or scratch a single Math Rash.