

MAKING

THE

CASE!

Real-life school and classroom scenarios for facilitating conversations between teachers and policymakers in order to connect practice and policy to improve student achievement in schools nationwide

By
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in the
TEACHERS NETWORK
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with an introduction by
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THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK is to introduce a new way for teachers to ensure that their voice informs and influences education policymaking—so that policy best supports teaching and learning for all students. MetLife Fellows—full-time classroom teachers—in the Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) have written 19 cases to date in order to facilitate conversations with policymakers. The goal is to help policymakers understand how policy plays out in real classrooms in real schools, and to experience first-hand the unintended consequences that result from national, state, and local education policies.

Over the last decade, hundreds of teacher leaders nationwide have conducted action research studies in their classrooms and schools to better understand the connections among practice, research, policy, and student achievement. Fellows have used the findings from their studies to generate policy recommendations. Now, in our efforts to continue to build policymakers' awareness of this body of research and recommendations, the fellows are using this content to develop cases. While cases have been used extensively in academic settings, this is the first time that cases are being used in a practical, real-world context—to help policymakers make better policy.

TNLI has enlisted the support of Katherine K. Merseth at Harvard University to guide us in this work. We are excited about her helping us pioneer this initiative, and for recognizing the potential power of using cases to build bridges between schoolhouses and statehouses.

We invite you to join us in this work. There are four cases presented in this volume; all 19 are published at www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases. We have also provided a summary of each case and its web address. Our hope is that teacher leaders across the country will use these cases to jump-start discussions with policymakers. The way this would work is as follows:

- 1 Invite policymaker(s) to meet with your group of teacher leaders.
- 2 Select appropriate case.
- 3 Provide policymaker(s) with case to read in advance of your meeting.
- 4 Refer to discussion questions provided at the end of each case to help facilitate your conversation with policymaker(s).
- 5 Use this conversation as a stepping stone toward building an ongoing relationship with policymakers(s) to ensure that the teacher's voice is front-and-center in education decision-making.

For more information and/or to share your experiences, please contact us. Together, we can make sure that all students succeed.

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TEACHERS NETWORK LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

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INTRODUCTION

By **KATHERINE K. MERSETH**

Education policy, at the local, state, and federal level, exerts an enormous influence on the world of educational practice. Laws, regulations, and contracts all shape what teachers and school administrators do and how they work with children in our nation's K-12 schools. While policy seeks to enable more effective education to occur, some policies may be established with little input from practice. The professional judgments and decisions of practitioners are also important in determining how children are educated. Policy influences practice, but what of the reverse? In what ways can practice inform policy? Clear, accurate information from the world of practice is critical for those formulating effective education policy. But with some 52 million children in more than 15,000 school districts with 2.5 million teachers across the country, establishing pathways to communicate information about educational practice to a myriad of policymakers is a challenging task.

This volume begins to address this challenge by presenting cases that describe the world of practice. The purpose of this work is to illustrate, in vivid and accurate real-life accounts, the work of practitioners in our nation's schools. This work offers to policymakers at various levels a window on how policy can positively or negatively impact practice. In clear, easily read and remembered essays, teacher leaders from across the country who are members of the prestigious Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) provide important perspectives from classrooms and schools about educating children.

What are cases?

The essays in this volume represent actual descriptions of schools and classrooms. They are of a particular form called cases and are depictions written by teachers about the lives of students, teachers, and administrators that are played out in schools. The topics for these cases were selected by the teacher-writers as particularly relevant to their work. Some describe the influence of specific policy requirements such as the federal legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), or state-level English as a Second Language initiatives, while others explore tensions around particular curricular choices, grouping of students, parental involvement, and the distribution of resources, including those related to financial and human capital. All of the issues presented in these cases are complex and not easily resolved. Competing values and perspectives abound throughout the stories.

It is important for the reader to realize that the cases in this volume are not 'made-up'—they are based on real situations experienced by real people in real schools. They offer pictures in accurate and compelling ways of the lives and voices of those who work daily in our schools. While names and specific details have been changed to offer anonymity to individuals and their contexts, these are the only changes introduced in the cases.

Good cases, such as those in this collection, encourage discussion and debate. They engage readers in powerful and sometimes emotional exchanges because they invoke personal beliefs and values. Often, these values and beliefs are in conflict. However, the theory of action behind case use is that having open and honest exchanges, in which multiple perspectives are aired, can promote critical analysis and more extensive understanding of the issues. Cases have no role in developing one 'right answer' or a particular viewpoint. Instead, their role is to stimulate thoughtful dialogue, careful listening, and collaborative problem solving.

HOW ARE CASES USED?

- > *As an exemplar of best practices*
- > *As a tool to practice problem solving, analysis, ways of thinking*
- > *As a self-reflective tool*
- > *As an approach to engage policymakers*

Cases and the case method of instruction have a long history in professional education. Doctors, lawyers, social workers, architects, business leaders, teachers, and school administrators may frequently encounter cases and the case method of instruction in their professional training. Used initially at the Harvard Law School in the late 1800's to explore legal precedents, the pedagogical method has gained popularity over the last century because of its ability to bring the world of practice into the professional classroom for study and analysis.

Cases may be used in different ways. Some cases are written as exemplars of best practices, as examples to be studied and emulated. Other cases can serve as a tool for self reflection by the writer. Not meant for public review, such cases help individuals sort out their own personal thinking since putting personal views on paper can be a clarifying experience. Finally, and most frequently, cases are used as a tool to practice problem analysis, problem solving, and different ways of thinking. It is in this latter sense that the cases in this volume were produced. Individuals who seek to better understand the world of practice find cases compelling because they help represent complex situations where many factors and influences come into play. Cases also honor a constructivist approach to learning that builds and

benefits on the knowledge of the discussants. Individuals bring their extant knowledge to the case, sometimes adding this knowledge and developing more robust understandings and thinking as a result of the combination of existing knowledge and discussions of the particular case situation. As a result of the discussions, views and opinions are often reshaped, enhanced, and enriched.

Cases are also popular in professional education because they demand a level of cooperation, collaboration, and mutual respect. The views of one person rarely remain intact through a case discussion. More frequently, a new perspective is built together by the case discussion participants, often developing into an understanding of the issue that no one held prior to the group discussion. Through collaboration and cooperation, a more nuanced and often more creative understanding is built through discussion. Participants in case discussions also develop other important skills of listening and respectfully responding. One learns how to articulate personal and sometimes alternative conflicting viewpoints. The development of these skills is an important byproduct of the case method approach.

Dilemmas in Cases

Compelling cases frame difficult dilemmas, situations that are “messy, complicated, and conflict-filled” (Cuban, 2001, p.10).¹ In reading the cases, one can quickly see multiple points of view, differing values, and difficult choices. Decisions must be weighed with respect to factors such as money, time, politics, human capacity, or culture. Often these competing perspectives cannot be simultaneously satisfied. Frequently, issues in education are simplistically framed as problems. But so-called problems in education are more frequently dilemmas that require management of values. Knowing the difference can be empowering and result in more effective education for children.

Cases offer a particularly effective way to explore educational dilemmas because they support a more complex understanding of the situation. Through discussion and conversation, readers explore the costs and benefits of various approaches. As such, cases do not seek to present solutions, but rather offer opportunities to explore how a particular issue or dilemma can be “satisfied”—satisfied by sacrificing (Simon as cited in Cuban).² Dilemmas, as presented in these cases, are not solved; they are managed.

Cases and Policymakers

The Teachers Network Leadership Institute believes that cases provide a powerful and efficient

tool for practitioners to communicate with policymakers. The heart of educational practice is decision-making and action. Educational practitioners make hundreds of decisions each day, and these choices invariably involve competing values and points of view. Further, these decisions occur within an environment circumscribed by education policy. Thus, finding effective ways to increase communication between teachers and legislators is essential.

Because Americans tend to be a ‘can-do’ culture, we often rush to an understanding of complex situations without completely exploring alternatives and possibilities. We may not think about how suggestions to alleviate first-order problems can generate a new second set of problems. In schools, the impact of a specific policy to address a particular need frequently can create new issues worthy of consideration and concern. Policymakers, as our representatives, also fall into this characterization as members of a can-do culture. They want to understand issues quickly and easily. They want to ‘solve’ an issue and move onto the next topic. More frequently than not, however, difficult issues in education are dilemmas, as noted above. They are not solved once and for all. They do not bend to technical solutions and, thus, are in need of creative approaches based on in-depth understandings. Cases offer an effective and creative way to develop this nuanced understanding and knowledge so essential to thoughtful education policy and practice.

¹ Cuban, L. (2001) *How can I fix it?: Finding solutions and managing dilemmas: An educator's' roadmap*. New York: Teachers College Press.

² Ibid.

ARE YOU IN OR ARE YOU OUT?

By **ERICA LITKE**, MetLife Fellow, TNL New York City

Main Entrance, 3:02 p.m.

Jayson and Tariq walked past the metal detector on the way out of the building. As they put on their belts and du-rags and took out their cell phones to text message friends, they nodded towards Jess Jones and Rosanna Sullivan, who were standing by the door on dismissal duty.

The teachers overheard Tariq as he laughingly said to Jayson, “Yo man, Ms. Mariano marked me absent again today. It’s not even worth showing up anymore if she’s just gonna mark me absent—she doesn’t even know who I am. I don’t know why I bother going to that class.”

Jayson high-fived the security guard at the door, turned to Tariq and said, “Yeah, plus that stuff she makes us do is so boring. We’re never going to use it anyway. I’m not even going to go tomorrow. I mean, I’m sure she’ll fail me anyway.”

“Yeah,” Tariq replied. “Shoot, I don’t wanna go to that class anymore either.”

“C’mon man, you gotta just get through it and be out. At least you gonna graduate in June.”

Tariq rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Graduation ain’t no big thing. No one in my family graduated, and they’re all fine. Look at my uncle—he got his own business and everything. I made it further than he did in school. I don’t even give a crap anymore. I’m never using this stuff in life anyway—gotta get me outta here and working already.”

Jess and Rosanna exchanged looks as the boys passed through the front door. Jess felt like there was a rock in the pit of her stomach. She taught both boys math last year and prepared them for the state graduation exam.

Inspiration for this case was taken from *Been there, done that: Student inquiry of high school dropouts*, an action research study conducted by Erik J. Shager, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2004. Additional research includes work done by Richard Murnane and colleagues at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

“Rosanna, Jayson needs that credit to graduate. We need to figure something out. He’s a good kid, but he’s got a lot of stuff going on at home. He’s already 19. It takes him so long to learn material, if he starts skipping class he’s going to spiral downhill quickly.” Jess continued, “And Tariq—he hates school so much. I always worked really hard to engage him in class, but when he’s not engaged, he just checks out.”

Rosanna knew. She had Jayson in physics this year and taught Tariq two years ago. She knew both boys and understood their level of engagement (or disengagement) well. She sighed heavily, frustrated with the idea that it was once again her job as a teacher to convince kids to care about school. Rosanna knew Jess was right, but how much more could she do for these kids? It’s not as if the real world is going to cut them any slack.

“Hang on,” Jess interrupted, “there’s Eva! I haven’t seen her in ages. She’s missed my first period class every day for a month and hasn’t been to basketball practice in a couple of weeks. Maybe the baby is sick or she’s had some childcare issues.”

Rosanna walked away shaking her head. She didn’t want to get involved. She had enough to deal with. Couldn’t Jess just worry about teaching math and getting more kids to pass the test?

As Eva approached, Jess greeted her enthusiastically, but with a toughness that the students had come to expect. “Eva, can we talk about your attendance—what is going on? Where have you been? Is everything okay with the baby?”

“I just came from Mr. Seidman’s office.” Jess was not surprised that the principal was getting involved with Eva’s attendance. She was one of the brightest kids in the school with the highest test scores. Eva’s eyes welled up and she explained, bursting into tears, “He told me he doesn’t want me coming to school anymore. He told me to drop out and get a GED.”

General Instruction High School

General Instruction High School (GIHS) was a medium-sized comprehensive high school enrolling approximately 850 students. It was located in a hip neighborhood populated by artists and young professionals. The student body, however, came largely from the housing projects on the far side of the highway that divides the city. Due to the city’s open choice system for high school, the school was open to students from throughout the city, but many students chose to attend a school near to home. The student body was 54.6% African American, 40.8% Hispanic, 2.8% white, and 1.8% Asian and other. The teaching staff was largely white. Only 3.3% of students were recent immigrants (as opposed to 13.6% city-wide).

GIHS had been considered a relatively safe school with 10 criminal incidents the previous year (mostly against property) and 40 non-criminal incidents. The school had a suspension percentage that was roughly the same as that of the entire city. Despite this, a new city

policy required students to pass through metal detectors and swipe computerized ID cards upon entry. Recent changes in school safety policies meant that the city police department supplied and trained some of the security staff in the building.

The school's motto was "Excellence at Every Step," and according to its mission statement, the school was committed to "producing responsible citizens who will become life-long learners committed to success in a democratic society." The school had roughly 380 freshmen, but only 46 seniors. Approximately 15% of its students were classified as "ungraded," taking classes that they needed to graduate, but not having accumulated sufficient credits to be classified as seniors. In a city where officially 58.2% of the class of 2005 graduated on time, GIHS graduated 48.1% of its students after four years. 16.9% of students dropped out, and 35.1% were still enrolled after four years.

In order to graduate from GIHS, students had to pass the mandated state assessments. Approximately 60% of GIHS students passed the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment with a 65% or higher and just under 50% passed the math assessment.¹ However, these figures have been rising steadily over the past five years. GIHS was in its second year of restructuring, having not met state and federal benchmarks for improvement.

In a city plagued by high rates of principal and administrative turnover, General Instruction benefited from consistent leadership. The principal of GIHS was a teacher in the building for ten years and an assistant principal for five years before becoming principal four years ago.

Principal's Office, 3:57 p.m.

Sam Seidman shook his head and ran his hand through his gray hair. He sighed as his guidance counselor Rachel Rosenfeld was gathering together the transcripts and attendance reports she had pulled on Eva for the meeting. Rachel braced herself for one of Sam's now-famous "what does she expect" rants.

"What does she expect? This is crazy! Eva's had 27 absences so far this semester and has been late 73 times. Failing all of her classes isn't doing her any good. She needs to be done with high school so she can support her child. It kills me—she's so damn smart. She can run circles around most of the other kids in this school. She just can't pull it together."

Rachel stared down at Eva's transcript showing mostly Bs and a few Cs and As until she left to have the baby in April of the year before. She quietly replied, "You know, she just finally secured

¹In New York State, students must pass exams in five subject areas in order to graduate: Math, ELA, Science, US History, and Global History. The Math and ELA scores are more publicized as they are used for the purposes of No Child Left Behind. GIHS has a passing rate of 69% on the Science exam, 66% on the Global History exam, and 54% on the US History exam. Passing for these exams is a 55 or higher. It is interesting to note that only 37%, 31%, and 16% pass with a 65 or higher on the three exams respectively.

day care. She thought she could do it, but her boyfriend wasn't able to help out, and her mom is frustrated with her. The thing is, the daycare required a three-week transition period—so she's got to be there with the baby for three more weeks. But I'm sure after that ..."

"Come on Rachel, we cut her a deal last spring and gave her all those incompletes. But she didn't hold up her end of the bargain. She didn't even show up to take the ELA test and she would have been one of our highest scorers! If she wanted to finish high school, she'd figure it out. Think about it; she's so smart that she'll pass the test. She could be in college by the fall and get on with her life. She should drop out, take the GED."

Rachel thought back to the study she had read about recently in her graduate program that talked about how only 30% of students who take the GED exam the first time actually pass. Didn't they also talk about how students with a GED have a lower earning potential?

Conversations like these with Sam made Rachel really uncomfortable. She had a couple of friends from high school who had taken the GED, but they came from well-off families. She remembered high school pretty vividly—it was only five years ago after all. Her large suburban high school had been rough social terrain for some of her friends. It had never been a question of academic ability. They left early, got a GED, and went on to good colleges.

"Getting her into a GED program is not the problem. It's how she's perceived afterwards," Rachel replied quietly. "We just looked at this study in my graduate class that talked about how students with GEDs earn significantly less than high school graduates. There is still a stigma associated with the GED versus a GIHS diploma."

"Well, how is she perceived if she fails all of her classes and doesn't get that diploma? How are we perceived? If she goes to a GED program, she'll get into college and get on with her life. Even better, she's not counted as a dropout by the city. You know they're on my case about the dwindling numbers of students. They think we're only at 75% capacity! If we're not careful with the numbers, who knows how many freshmen we'll have next year." Sam put Eva's papers into her file folder and looked at the clock. "Look, meet with her tomorrow and counsel her out. Okay, it's already after 4:00. I'm supposed to meet with the district rep about our January test scores and where we are with our adequate yearly progress. We need to move on to the next kid. Whose case is next?"

Guidance Office, 5:17 p.m.

Putting away her files after her meeting with Sam, Rachel was frustrated. She couldn't help but wonder if she could have done more to advocate for Eva and some of the other students. After all, hadn't GIHS cut deals with Eva in the past? There were the incompletes; there was the agreement to move her up to the 12th grade even though she didn't have the credits

from 11th grade. Sam was the one who always talked about how brilliant she was and if they didn't cut her the deal, she would drop out. And now he's pushing her out!

They had talked about so many students that afternoon, but Eva's case ate at Rachel the most. She had mentioned the part of the study which stated that only 11% of students who get their GED complete at least one year of college, never mind finish. She brought up Eva's boyfriend who had dropped out the year before. He started a GED course but didn't pass the test. He had hoped to enroll in a community college. But now he's working a string of part-time jobs to make money to support Eva and the baby. Then again, Eva's life outside of school won't be getting any easier any time soon. Maybe Sam was right, maybe a GED was at least better than no diploma at all.

Rachel was surprised by a knock at her door so late, but less surprised to see Jess Jones in the doorway. Jess was one of those young, ambitious teachers who came through the city's alternative certification program. Rachel liked her and was impressed by how much time she put in with students. She knew that not everyone in the building felt that way, but Rachel appreciated how Jess seemed to care about the students. Jess stayed after school to tutor her students almost everyday—despite not getting paid to do so. She also coached basketball and was always doing some crazy math project with her classes. It was so like Jess to still be in the building at almost 5:30.

"Sorry to bother you, Rachel. I know you probably want to get out of here, but I wanted to talk to you about a couple of kids." Rachel groaned inwardly, sure that this conversation meant that it would be a while before she could go home and would probably add to her already overscheduled load for tomorrow.

"Do you know Tariq Moore and Jayson Dominguez? Rosanna and I overheard them both talking on the way out of the building today. They're worried they're failing English and are both talking about dropping out. I was hoping maybe you could talk to them tomorrow?"

Jess knew that Rachel was her best hope. The guidance counselor had a reputation for advocating for students even if it put her at odds with the administration. Despite the fact that she was supposed to be concerned with whether or not kids understood geometry, Jess found herself more and more coming to Rachel to help students deal with their lives outside of school. Without that help, so many of them didn't even stay in school.

Rachel turned to her computer to look up the two boys' records in the school's computer system. Ignoring the 52 e-mails waiting for her, she called up Tariq's record. She knew Tariq. He had worked since middle school in his uncle's funeral home. A few years earlier, a highly publicized child abuse case ended with the death of a toddler. Tariq's uncle's funeral home handled the burial, and Tariq was a minor celebrity at school from working on the case. His transcript showed him to be a solid D student. Rachel knew him more as a street-smart kid

who had never particularly cared for school. He came by to say hello almost daily, but never sought out counseling. Although he lived with his mother, she wasn't much of a factor in his life. But he idolized his uncle and was planning on working in the funeral home after graduation. If he could just put in the seat time in English and squeak by, she thought he'd be fine.

She typed a few commands and soon was looking at Jayson's record. She looked his transcript over for a minute. Wow, she thought, he is a long way from graduation. He repeated the 7th grade and has been at GHS for five years already. He still hasn't passed the ELA exam despite three tries. He barely passed the other exams with a 55. He'll be 20 years old in July. "It looks like if he passes all his classes this semester and next and does a couple of summer school classes, plus one more math in the fall, he can graduate by January. I guess that's not so bad. What's the problem?"

"I don't think things are going so well in Ms. Mariano's English class for either him or Tariq. I worked really hard to keep both boys engaged in math class, but it doesn't seem like Mariano is keeping them interested in the class."

Rachel sometimes worried about teachers like Jess—she didn't mind jumping through hoops for her students, but then the kids started to expect all teachers to do that. Was it Ms. Mariano's fault that she wasn't interested in doing the same? "Isn't it the students' responsibility to do the work? The boys need to do what they need to do to pass," Rachel revealed.

"But what will happen to them if they drop out? I don't know if either one could pass the GED. Jayson's skills are really low—I don't think he ever got services when he moved here from the Dominican Republic in elementary school. I think he might have a learning disability. And Tariq just doesn't seem to care enough to pass. We can't let them drop out!"

Rachel reacted to Jess' plea with a sigh. Another discussion about "saving kids" from dropping out. Tariq will be fine, she thought. High school diploma or not, he'll work for his uncle.

But did Jess have a point about Jayson? If he is as low-skilled as Jess says, he won't pass Mariano's class and probably won't graduate. Is a GED program the answer? Could he even pass the GED? And then what?

She made a mental note to find that study from her graduate class. It said something about students with low cognitive skills who drop out of high school earning two-thirds less than students who leave school with higher skills. If he did have some sort of learning disability, Rachel knew that it would be next to impossible to get him evaluated this late in his high school career. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was already 5:30 p.m. I guess I'm not going to yoga at 6:00 p.m., she thought to herself.

"Look Jess, I appreciate your concern, I do. I'll try to grab both boys tomorrow and talk to them. But if they're determined to drop out, it'll be hard to stop them. You should try to get

out of here soon—it’s already so late.”

Jess smiled and thanked Rachel.

As she watched Jess walk down the hallway, Rachel added Tariq and Jayson to her long list of students to check in with tomorrow. She glanced up at the clock and the huge piles of files that still needed to be put away. Turning her gaze to her computer, she saw that there were now 59 e-mails waiting for her to read and reply. Tomorrow was looking like a rough day. She had a number of attendance cases to track down, three new transfer students’ schedules to work out, and Eva’s conference. She didn’t look forward to giving Sam Seidman Jess’ news about Tariq and Jayson. Just what he wants, she thought dejectedly, more students dropping out. What’s wrong with GHS anyway? Why can’t this school get kids to graduate?

Discussion Questions

- 1 How should Rachel advise her students? What should she say to Sam about Tariq and Jayson?
- 2 Should Eva be prevented from dropping out? What about Tariq? Jayson?
- 3 Do schools have a duty to prevent students from dropping out?
- 4 Is a GED the same as a high school diploma? Should the GED be an option to some or to everyone?
- 5 To what degree does requiring students to graduate in four years limit students?
- 6 When is it acceptable for a principal to counsel students out of a school?
- 7 Should students be prevented from dropping out if, when they don’t, they lower pass rates by which schools are evaluated?

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Beyond the Test

By **ELIZABETH GIL**, MetLife Fellow, TML New York City (NY)

“Oh, Jacinda’s in your class this year. She’s a sweet girl,” Mrs. Anita Harris, PS 1000’s English as a Second Language coordinator commented as she passed Ms. Gina Neilson in the hallway. “She was in Ms. Menolos’ bilingual class last year in third grade when she came from the Dominican Republic. She’s still an English Language Learner based on her English as a Second Language State exam. Her parents agreed to put her in the monolingual class to help her progress from the advanced level to proficiency in English.”

Gina replied, “I know, but her writing isn’t at the fourth grade level, and she has trouble following what I do in class sometimes. Her parents don’t help so much either. Her mom seems nice when I try to speak with her, but I don’t think Jacinda gets too much academic support at home. I can see us not making the adequate yearly progress (AYP)¹ targets, and I’ll be hearing it from Principal Grey. He’s always all about AYP and getting all those level 3s and 4s. Jacinda and all my students like her are supposed to be able to write at the same level as my other students who’ve been here since pre-K? She’s only been here a year—a year and three or four months when she sits for the test in January. How do I make that happen? I don’t have a background working with students whose second language is English.”

Washington Heights and PS 1000—The New Language School

PS 1000—The New Language School was located in a residential neighborhood in Washington Heights, an immigrant section of Manhattan. Ninety-five percent of the school’s students

Materials for this case were taken extensively from *Understanding the American writing process* conducted by Margie Rogasner, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2005. To protect individuals and organizations, the case has been disguised. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective practice.

¹ Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a system to measure whether a district and/or school is making satisfactory progress toward meeting the NCLB goal of all students in achieving a proficiency in English language arts, mathematics, and science by the 2013-2014 school year.

were eligible for free lunch. Due to overcrowding, the building was shared by three schools. Two hundred of the students were English Language Learners (ELLs),² many of whom were newcomers to the school or to the city itself, with little formal education in their native countries. The majority of these students hailed from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, with some students coming from other Caribbean countries, Latin America, and East Africa. 80% of the students were neighborhood children, while the other 20% of students came from various other sections of the city. While the school met its adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets in the fourth grade overall, the school’s special education and English Language Learner (ELL) subgroups³ had not met their AYPs in the previous school year.

English Language Learners and English Language Arts Assessments

Ms. Neilson looked at her class roster again—seven English language learners who would be in an English-only class for the first time this year. This year would be crucial as the children transitioned from a bilingual to a monolingual setting, she thought to herself. Of the 25 students in her class, most were from Latin backgrounds, but she would also be teaching Isaac, who was Ghanaian, and Jezin, who was Albanian. Of the other English Language Learners (ELLs) in the class, she also had Jacinda, from Mexico, and Sandra, from the Dominican Republic. Ms. Neilson thought about the English Language Arts (ELA) assessment policy change, the change she worried most about this school year.

Gina knew the research that stated that students acquire academic language proficiency within five to seven years.⁴ But she also realized that her ELL students would have to take the assessment in less than four months, less than two years after coming to this country. She knew that academic language used for writing would be a challenge.

Gina let out a sigh of frustration, as Anita Harris passed by the room and heard her. “Gina, they’ve got you talking to yourself now,” Anita said. “You’re not supposed to sound like that for another month or two,” Anita smiled.

Ms. Neilson looked at the data that was distributed at the faculty meeting and said, “Look here. English Language Learners’ performance improved between 2004 and 2005, but they’re still not meeting standards the way our English proficient students are. 48.7% of English proficient

² An English Language Learner (ELL) is determined based on the Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R) upon entry to the New York City school system. Subsequently, ELL status is determined by students’ scores on the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) through which students are identified as Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, or Proficient in the English language.

³ No Child Left Behind defines 10 student groups: All Students, 5 ethnic groups (American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White), Limited English Proficient (ELL), Special Education, Migrant Status and Free and Reduced Priced Lunch. Subgroup sizes vary from state to state. In New York, it is 30 students.

⁴ Cummins, J. (1994) *The acquisition of English as a second language*.

students met their grade-level standard, but only 13.6% of ELLs did. 13.6%! Nowhere near the AYP target, not near it at all. Anita, there’s got to be something to help improve the numbers.”

| CATEGORY | 2004 | | | | 2005 | | | |
|----------------------------|------------|--|------|-------|------------|--|------|-------|
| | No. Tested | Percent of Tested Students Scoring at Levels | | | No. Tested | Percent of Tested Students Scoring at Levels | | |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 + 4 | | 1 | 2 | 3 + 4 |
| English Proficiency Status | | | | | | | | |
| ELLs | 62 | 58.1 | 38.7 | 3.2 | 66 | 43.9 | 42.4 | 13.6 |
| English Proficiency | 327 | 19.9 | 41.3 | 38.8 | 310 | 9.4 | 41.9 | 48.7 |

Later on, Ms. Neilson had an idea and shared it with Anita. “Jacinda, Jezin, basically all of my English language learners—I think we need to bridge the gap with their parents, to help them really understand the school system’s expectations in New York. Maybe to target writing. That seems to be where our students have the most trouble. What if we focused on writing with the parents, too?”

“Whoah!” Anita responded. “Sounds like a big job, but why not? Feel free to bounce ideas off of me. I don’t have time to work with you much, but feedback I can do. Good luck!” As she walked toward the elevator, Mrs. Harris winked as she added, “Oh, and Gina, here’s a tip. When you pitch it to Mr. Grey, remember to talk about meeting the adequate yearly progress targets. That will make his ears perk up. AYP! AYP! AY...” Her voice faded away as the elevator door closed.

A few days later, Gina appeared at Principal Grey’s, knocking and peeking into the office. “Good morning, Mr. Grey. I was wondering if you’d had a chance to read my proposal?”

“What? Your proposal?” Mr. Grey was distracted by 10 pages of e-mails he’d printed out, just a small portion of the contents of his e-mail inbox for the morning. “Oh, Gina, sorry. Yes, the idea about the series of writing workshops for mothers. Why the mothers, again?”

“Uh, well, based on what I’ve researched, family involvement at home seems to protect children as they progress through our complex education system. The more families support their children’s learning...”⁵

“Yes, I understand all that Gina, but the mother angle?” Mr. Grey glanced at his office clock, and Gina knew her time with the principal was ticking away.

She continued, “Well, see, in my class the moms are the ones who are in charge of education in the family. It’s the mothers who are the main contact. These workshops would provide a

⁵ Henderson, A., Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

basic home-school connection, explain teachers' roles with parents, develop classroom community, present methods for teaching literacy, then positively affect student achievement.”

Quickly, she added, “And of course, positively affect the AYP targets. I know we want to see growth and progress on the adequate yearly progress targets.” She looked intently at Mr. Grey, in search of a clue. Did the AYP angle help?, she wondered.

“Hmm.” Mr. Grey was still shuffling the printed e-mails. Ms. Neilson didn't know whether the conversation was over or if she should stay. “Okay, Gina, you can have your workshops, but remember, I want to see it on the test scores. We're spending the school's financial resources on incentives for parents and child care, and paying for planning and workshop time.”

Ms. Neilson wasn't sure she heard right, but then realized that all of what he said translated to a “Yes.” Excited, but also concerned and still cautious, Ms. Neilson smiled widely.

“Thank you, Mr. Grey. I appreciate this opportunity. Have a great day!” There was a little skip in her step as she walked out.

“Oh, Gina.” He looked serious, but then allowed a smile to peek out.

“Yes, Mr. Grey?”

“Thank you for your effort.”

Wow! That sounded like a compliment, Gina thought to herself. Mr. Grey didn't give those out too often. Why *were* compliments so few and far between? Too much stress? Didn't he realize that his staff was dedicated and hard-working?

Still, she felt so excited. It was going to be a lot of work, but the most important thing was that she was going to get to do it. She couldn't help but beam all the way to her classroom.

Anita and Gina, while moving their timecards the morning before the first workshop, engaged in a brief conversation.

“You know, Gina,” Anita observed, “the numbers don't say anything about a student's growth. Remember Agosto? He didn't even know his alphabet in Spanish a year-and-a-half ago? He came SUCH a long way, but the numbers don't reflect that do they?”

Gina nodded and frowned, “Yeah, it seems that they only say, ‘Oh, your ELL population isn't meeting the standard. You're a failing school.’”

Mrs. Harris continued, “Remember last year, those letters that went to parents—with the option to send their kids to other schools. Our school didn't even know about the letters until parents started asking questions! Our scores were second highest in the region and many of the schools that were listed as options had lower achievement levels on the English Language Assessment (ELA)

than we did! I'd love for these people who make these decisions to take a Spanish Language Arts (SLA)... You take the test in Spanish after being somewhere for a year and a day and tell me if you are rated 'proficient'! Busy day today, right? Two workshops—afternoon and evening? If I don't see you before you have your workshops, Good luck!” She turned to leave the timecard room.

Ms. Neilson smiled at Mrs. Harris, then turned serious again, returning to the earlier conversation.

“I'll walk with you. You know, they really don't care if we connect with parents, or the kids, or do anything else, do they? Just get scores on the test. That's all that really matters. Last year, I had a student who could barely read and 'lo and behold, he managed a 3 on the ELA test. Maybe he guessed correctly a lot. Now he is in fifth grade, and he's not getting academic intervention services, but he needs more support. So, what does a 3 really tell us, huh?”

“Hey, Gina,” Anita responded, “you're preaching to the choir. I'd like to think that the people who think this stuff up had a good reason. I mean they can't purposely be trying to make teachers miserable, can they?”

Later in the week, Gina approached Anita with a big grin.

“Hey, Anita! Eight moms at the workshop this week—five in the afternoon and three in the evening. I am psyched. It felt good, but I was nervous. None of those moms went to school here, and some didn't even finish grammar or high school in their home countries. We can't take anything for granted. If they connect with each other, they'll be more likely to keep coming—maybe become a network of their own. Imagine the possibilities, Anita!”

Anita smiled wistfully, “Ah, cue the mystical, fantasy music. I hope you're right, and I'm glad you're feeling energized. I hope that Grey feels the same way.”

Two weeks later, Ms. Neilson and Mrs. Harris checked in with each other over lunch.

“So, Gina, how are those moms of yours?”

“They're okay. I think we're all learning something, and the kids seem really excited that their moms are 'in school,' too,” Gina replied.

With an impish look toward her friend, Anita asks, “That's great Gi, but will it make you a 'no level 1s' classroom?”

“Look,” Gina responded a little hurt, “Of the moms who've been to all three workshops so far, three of the kids have been making some really nice progress, and their moms have even started to do things at home with them. Two are moving along little by little, but still moving. And the conversations we've had—that the mothers have with each other—about reading, writing, their personal situations, I mean wow! It's more than the straight academics.”

Her friend replied, “Maybe with what you're doing, there will be more of it next year, that

connection you're talking about, and kids really making strides.”

As Gina placed some pages in the photocopy bin, Mr. Grey asked, “Ms. Neilson, can you come in please?”

“Sure, Mr. Grey.”

Looking across his desk, he asked, “How are those workshops going? What have you seen?” Knowing that he was referring to performance, Gina tried to respond with enthusiasm, “The group is beginning to come together, and students are making progress.”

“This sounds,” Mr. Grey paused, “good, Gina. Do you think it will make a dent in the children’s scores? The parents aren’t graded, but the kids are, and so we will be too. I want these opportunities for parents and for you teachers to implement your ideas, but I also need to meet these realities. You understand, don’t you?”

Gina felt her face flush, “Mr. Grey, with all due respect, I hope you can see that I am becoming a better teacher through this. This is making a difference, for me, for those families, for my kids. Believe me. I don’t forget the AYP and the scores and the pressure. It’s all around us. I am making a difference. You might not see it this year, but we’ll see the benefits. I have to believe that or else I shouldn’t even be here.”

Hearing the door close quietly behind her, Ms. Neilson hoped that her response wouldn’t be considered insubordinate.

It was now almost June, and the test results were to be posted within the next week. For the last few months, she’d been on pins and needles, not knowing how the test results would look. She knew she shouldn’t feel this way, but she did. Despite the success she felt with the workshops, she also felt that she’d made herself a poster-child for “reforms and initiatives that might not work and will never be attempted again.” With all the stress, she wasn’t sure if, in the end, going that extra mile was worth it.

Mr. Grey looked at the thank-you letter written by the mothers who attended the writing workshops coordinated by Ms. Neilson. They must have worked really hard on it, he thought.

He was anxious that the funding he set aside for these workshops should have gone into straight test prep, test sophistication materials, expanding extended day for test prep. Then he shook away that thought and asked himself: Is that really what I wanted for my school, though?

He wished he had the test results. At least that would partially answer his question. But he still wouldn’t know for a few more days.

Discussion Questions

- 1 How does the way NCLB identifies schools as successful or failing cause tensions between administrators and teachers and impact the overall environment in schools?
- 2 How should schools interact with parents, especially those whose children fall into special populations, such as English Language Learners or special education? What kind of supports should schools provide?
- 3 What is the value of setting foundations in a school (community connections, parental understanding, students’ deeper/process/critical thinking learning experiences) and keeping them despite not reaching 100% success in terms of adequate yearly progress (AYP)? Should schooling be geared mainly toward short-term outcomes in the form of test results, or on longer-term outcomes that might not be measured by standardized tests?
- 4 How does a school maintain the balance between the numbers — quantitative measures—and the qualitative aspects of teaching?

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

By **DEBORAH Q. SEIDEL**, MetLife Fellow, TNLI Fairfax County

“I’m sorry, Dee. There’s just no way to include Linda in your Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings for third grade. The only way to have the meeting each week is if your students are in ‘specials.’ Linda will be teaching third grade music at that time. However, I can assure you that your class will be assigned to Linda for the school year so that you can collaborate on your research project,” explained Janice. “I am interested to see how you two co-teach a unit of folklore and story retelling through music and reading.”

Dee Miller, a third grade teacher at Shady Grove Elementary School, was disappointed, if not surprised, to hear her administrator, Janice Melbourne, explain the scheduling conflicts that made it difficult to include Linda Sampson, the general education music teacher and her teacher research partner, in the third grade PLC. Dee and Linda, however, were determined. Even if it meant meeting during lunch time and before or after school, they were committed to working on this. Dee missed the music integrated into the curriculum that she enjoyed when teaching kindergarten. Linda was excited to find a general education teacher that was as interested in meeting the requirements of the county music Program of Studies (POS), as she was doing so for the Virginia state-mandated testing guidelines, the Standard of Learning (SOLs). They’d figure something out to work together. There was always e-mail, right?

Shady Grove Elementary School

Shady Grove Elementary School was a neighborhood school with approximately 880 students, ranging from kindergarten to sixth grade. While historically an upper-middle class to affluent community school with minimal racial and cultural diversity, the school’s demographics had

Materials for this case were taken from *What happens when specialists collaborate?* (2005), by Lucinda Sexton, TNLI MetLife Fellow, and *Tune in! A study in collaboration: Integration of music and language arts in a third grade class*, by Deborah Q. Seidel and Lucinda Sexton (a PowerPoint® Presentation presented as a roundtable discussion at the 2006 Fairfax Teachers Research Conference at The Waterford).

changed in recent years. County boundaries were opened up to widen the population to include several townhouse complexes and new neighborhoods. Additionally, Shady Grove had no English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) population, so students who needed those services were sent to another elementary school that is a center for that instruction. Most classes had 26 to 28 students. There were 107 students who got pulled out for gifted and talented instruction for one hour each week. Special education served 157 students in a variety of settings, from full inclusion into general education classes to a self-contained autism class of about six students.

The district school officials for Shady Grove Elementary introduced a county-wide initiative for school improvement, known as Professional Learning Communities (PLC). According to Eaker, Dufour, and Burnette, “a professional learning community is educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve.” After administrators and key teacher leadership teams received a crash course in PLC, the county mandated that PLC be implemented in every school in the county beginning in the second quarter of the 2005 school year. Teachers were informed in a series of faculty meetings, shown a video, and asked to read about PLC in *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*, by Eaker, Dufour, and Burnette. They write that the goal of PLC is to foster collaboration and shared vision, thereby developing a school mission focused on results and continued improvement.

County superintendent, David Sampson, mandated that each school administrator institute PLC in the winter of 2005. Despite the county mandate, school administrators were left largely to make the determination on how to do that. At Shady Grove, PLC’s were instituted at the grade-level teams.

Recipe for Collaboration

“So much for collaboration at PLC,” whispered Dee. “What a joke! Each week, we meet for 45 cram-packed minutes of team mumbo jumbo, when the real collaboration is relegated to snatched moments over lunch or team discussions on the playground.”

“Don’t I know it! How sad when we have to e-mail each other to make up stuff to put on the agenda,” replied Marty, Dee’s teammate. “As if we don’t already share everything we do, and plan together. These meetings just take time away from the real work of planning, preparing, and remediation. By the way, Dee, thanks for that multiplication remediation activity. Carl really got it! I was so proud of him! He did great on the math test.”

“Hey, how long do you think it will be before Dr. Sampson makes us all work lock-step? I mean, I love you guys, but I could never make the learning centers you do work for my special-needs

kids. I need to have much more teacher direction, and using parent volunteers is tricky with confidentiality concerns. What if they make us all do the same thing?” grumbled Kimberly.

“That would be all it takes to drive me from teaching all together. Hush... here comes Janice,” warned Dee. “Hello Janice. Here’s the agenda for our meeting. We’re planning the math calendar for next month.”

Similar scenarios played out throughout the building, around the copier, and in the staff lunch room. The administration was aware of the reluctance of the staff, and who could really blame them. If Janice was going to be totally honest, she wasn’t sure exactly what it was the county wanted from them. She was proud of her teachers, and for the most part, she felt they worked well as team players before PLC was initiated. Sure, some of the teams needed to work on sharing and getting along—but those were personality issues that were not likely to disappear behind the structure of an agenda and the rhetoric of a mission or vision.

PLC Workshop

Janice paused outside the teacher’s prep room. Dee, her third grade team leader, and Kay, an experienced first grade teacher were having a hushed but spirited discussion about collaboration.

Kay went on, “If you ask me, it’s all a big pile of hogwash. In my 25 years of teaching, I’ve never been expected to carry the weight of everyone else’s problems! It’s not my responsibility if the other teachers on my team aren’t able to control their kids and plan their lessons to be effective. They’re simply not training teachers to be responsible for their own lessons.”

Dee was shocked. “Kay, you don’t really mean that, do you? There’s so much to learn from each other. It’s not just the younger teachers learning from the older ones. Everyone has something to share. I’m learning so much from Linda in our integrated unit of folktales and music.”

“Are you kidding me?” interrupted Kay. “You are actually wasting your time on a unit of study on music? Since when is music a state-mandated Standards of Learning for third grade? Did I miss something or are they testing that at third grade now?”

“Oh Kay! You are incorrigible. You’re not really as hard on collaboration as all that, are you?” laughed Dee.

“Humph. I’ll close my door and do what needs to be done to reach my kids. Let’s see them try to fire me,” Kay retorted, as she collected her copies to leave.

Janice slipped back into her office around the bend in the hall, contemplating the conversation she’d just overheard. Maybe I should be dragging Kay to this workshop with Linda, she thought.

Janice and the leadership team, including Linda, attended a county-mandated workshop on PLC. They were given directions to engage in a powerful group process. Teachers needed to be a

part of the decision process in the goal setting, the content, and ultimately, the vision. Also, there was a clear difference between grade level meetings and collaborative learning teams. A light went on for Linda. How are Shady Grove’s teachers participating in the goal setting? What training have they been given to have a chance to create collaboration? How could Shady Grove break out of the traditional team meeting approach in order to embrace the collaborative approach that PLC was meant to be?

Workshop Follow-Up

Laden with these new ideas and questions, Linda attended a meeting with Janice and the leadership team to discuss some of her concerns. The leadership team agreed that the big resentment centered on teachers’ perceptions of giving up their planning time. While Janice recognized that the current PLC meetings at Shady Grove were really team meetings, she felt that it was important for them to continue, but they needed a new name: Team Meetings. But where did that leave them for meeting the expectations for PLC meetings from the county?

Ideas for helping to clarify the difference between PLC and team meetings included staff meetings focused on clarification and training with fun and interactive approaches such as skits or interactive games. Monday afternoons were currently set aside for meetings, training, and staff meetings. Students were released two hours early to facilitate this. Some Monday afternoons could be used for PLC; that way, specialists could be a part of it. Linda wondered how it would be received by the faculty.

Teacher Research Group

As the weeks passed, Dee and Linda worked toward their vision of a collaboratively taught unit. Dee took Linda to the reading room to look through third grade literature to find a story that would meet the requirements needed for retelling using musical elements such as rhythm, voice, and movement. Linda had never been to the reading room before. They selected the perfect story, and discussed how Dee would introduce the story in a reading class. Linda would follow up with a directed retelling using the musical elements they had decided on together. How exciting! Linda was thrilled at this new direction in her teaching. She couldn’t wait to share this at their next teacher research meeting.

Dee and Linda met with four other professionals for a half-day of teacher research group discussion and work. This was Shady Grove’s first year having a teacher research group. Dee started the group after transferring from another local school which had one. She personally had two years experience in teacher research, one as a leader. Oddly enough, there were several other specialists besides Linda in the group, including Amy, the general education art teacher, who was researching better teaching techniques for use with her autistic students.

She was working with Diane, an occupational therapist. Diane was an expert in her field, but split her time across several schools, servicing special-needs students. She was excited to be part of a group that put her in touch with teachers. Then there was Marty, another third grade teacher, a reluctant researcher who had much to offer, but felt overwhelmed. Finally, there was Jill, a fifth grade teacher who focused on technology, and drew a hard line between academics and the extras such as the specials of physical education, art, and music.

While she respected those areas, she didn't feel that their curriculum was as critical to student success as those that the state tested, such as the core curriculum she was held to teaching. Research discussions were aimed at meeting the various needs and interests of the teachers.

Amy and Diane were working together to meet the needs of the self-contained autism students in art class. Amy pointed out at one meeting, "You know, I have had no training on how to meet the needs of autistic students. The county provides no training for specialists on meeting the needs of this population. I was so frustrated! I go to their class and the teachers take their much needed breaks, but I am left with no guidance. The instructional assistants just end up doing their project for them. If I hadn't started asking Diane for some ideas, I would have had no idea what to do."

Diane replied, "These students have specific behavior modification plans that help them learn. Amy had no resources or training in that. Since we're working on this action research project, now we can work together to meet their needs. We're doing ground-breaking work. I don't know of anyone else who's working on this. When it was time to do a literature review, all we have to go on is clinical studies on autism."

"I'm glad I have you," laughed Amy.

"Well, this is really the first time that I have been involved with teachers in this way. Janice has been so supportive of my work, and in all the years that I have been working for the county, this is the first time that I have really felt a part of the staff. Individual therapy is very rewarding, but it is very different than managing the larger class groups that you folks do," Diane commented. "I get to be a part of the implementation of the suggestions I make. The follow-through is fascinating."

Jill spoke up, "I wish I could convince Leah to join us. My project is on interactive white board technology in my fifth grade class. Leah would be a valuable asset since she's our technology specialist. Although she was interested, she said that Janice wasn't in favor of her being out of the building for a half-day each month, on top of her T-Spec meetings that already pull her from the building each month."

Amy laughed, "Technology, Ha! I'd just be happy if everyone kept me in the loop for their teaching themes. The county mandates that my art curriculum 'support' the SOLs, but provides

no planning time for me to meet with teams to discuss these themes. Except for a few select teams, I never hear what's going on with learning units in most grades."

Jill replied, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but don't you think it is a little more important that teachers have time to plan their core curriculum such as science, social studies, math, and language arts. If you all don't keep the kids busy for us, when would we plan?"

"Keep the kids busy?" Amy choked. "Do you realize what you just said?"

Realizing that the conversation was heating up quickly, Dee interrupted. "Speaking of getting busy, let's grab our data and get started sharing our revised research findings. We can always debate PLC around the coffee pot in the morning," she laughed. The group sighed in relief. The tension of the moment passed, and they continued on.

Dee led the group through reflective journal techniques and more discussion. However, the discussion returned to the hot topic of PLC as it usually did.

"Does anyone really get PLC? I mean, it just seems like another way to check up on us anyway: weekly meetings, with an agenda and notes posted on the staff e-mail. Big Brother, here we come!" vented Marty.

"I don't think everyone really understands PLC yet," explained Linda. "I've been a part of the leadership team and we went to a workshop on it a few months ago. I thought things were going to change following that workshop, but that was two months ago. PLC and team meetings aren't really the same thing, but teachers need to be trained on that, although it doesn't look like that's happening right now."

"Perfect! More training. That's just what we all need!" screeched Dee. "What Janice should realize is that our teacher research group is the best PLC she could find." Everyone laughed.

Success

Dee and Linda, Amy and Diane, and the rest of the teacher research team continued throughout the year to meet and collaborate on their projects. At the end of the year, the group shared their projects at round-table presentations at a faculty meeting. Everyone was excited to have the outcomes. Dee noticed that Kay and the other usual teachers were uninterested, feeling that any meeting was a waste of time, but if the interest in next year's research group was any indication, teacher research had a successful first year, and a promising future at Shady Grove Elementary School.

The following spring of 2006, Dee and Linda met at the local teacher research convention to share their work on collaborative teaching in general education and music, and to present in a round-table format. It had been a year since their research, and months since they had seen each other. Linda

had transferred to another local elementary school. Perhaps a good move for many reasons, but both Dee and Linda missed the opportunity to refine and continue their collaborative teaching.

Dilemmas

As Dee and Linda caught up on each other’s lives and work, Linda asked about Shady Grove’s journey toward collaborative communities. Although she was no longer there, she wondered whether teachers received the necessary training to fully understand and move toward accepting and implementing PLC as it was meant to be. Has the county recognized the need for training teachers of special populations and/or new initiatives? Dee sat back with a sigh, “Linda, I sure miss your enthusiasm and tenacity. That’s what made our collaborative research a success in the first place. Any chance you’ll be coming back to Shady Grove? I need a collaborative teaching partner for next year.”

Discussion Questions

- 1 What are the benefits and drawbacks of implementing collaborative teaching environments that are mandated or created by external policy of the school systems or county regulations?
- 2 How does teacher collaboration take place outside formal meetings?
- 3 What are the alternatives to the traditional team meeting approach to collaborative teaching scenarios?
- 4 What do specialists and general education teachers offer each other in their goals of student success in achievement?
- 5 Does the teacher research group meet the expectations of a Professional Learning Community? Why or why not?
- 6 What does the county school system assume about teachers with its Professional Learning Community initiative?
- 7 What advice would you give Janice Melbourne, Shady Grove’s administrator?

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YOU’LL ALL LOOK GOOD ON PAGE 39 (OR ELSE!)

By **SUSAN GOLD**, *MetLife Fellow, TNLI San Francisco*

6:30 Monday morning

One Size Is Gonna Fit All: A Play in One Act

(Curtain rises on a fitting room. However, rather than in a department store, it is located in a school district central office building.)

Sales person: Good morning, teachers. Can I help you?

Customer: Oh, I really don’t need anything today. I’m just here to look. I have a Master’s Degree in clothing design and I’ve been taking the advanced professional seamstress refresher workshops for five years. Actually, I make my own clothes, based on the season and the occasion.

Sales person: Well, that’s not going to be possible. We want to have a consistent, professional look. How would it look if you are wearing designer clothes and the new teachers at Achievement Academy get their clothes from the sale rack at Mervyn’s?

Customer: O.K., you have a point. I’ll take the skirt and the shirt in size 12, please.

Sales person: Sorry, we decided that the entire lot should be size 6. That will represent us in the best light.

Customer: Oh, that will never fit!

Sales person: Well, this is what’s available to you. Maybe it’s time to lose a few pounds, hmm? [turning away] Sir, are you ready?

Customer: But wait! I need something that will fit...

Beep, beep, beep. Heart pounding, Eliza Carey reached for the off button on her alarm

The inspiration and materials for this case were taken from *Learning to be a good guy: Teaching for social justice in the primary classroom* by Liz Goss, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2005.

clock. This was not the first anxiety dream she had had, but one of the more memorable ones. That day, she would be launching the civil rights unit she had tailor made for her class.

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Hope Elementary School lay in the shadows of the Consolidated Center to the north, where Lake City’s football team played for millions of dollars, and the Sunnydale Gardens high-rise housing project to the south, where \$250,000 worth of illegal drugs passed through weekly. Hope was a very small kindergarten through eighth grade school with a population of 170 students. The students were 99% African-American and 95% low-income. The school was a “Public School of Choice,” meaning students were not assigned even if they lived in the neighborhood, unless their parents filed a request for enrollment. A little more than half of the students came from the neighborhood, but many parents chose Hope over their neighborhood school and drove their children to school. Hope was housed in the Skyway Multiplex, home to two other schools: a middle school and a high school. The three schools operated autonomously and were not “feeder” schools, that is, students graduating from one school did not necessarily feed into the school at the next level.

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, 167 of the city’s 448 elementary schools were deemed “failing” and placed on probation. Hope was one of those, and this was their first year on probation. The school was required to implement a board-approved math curriculum, science curriculum, and a basal series for reading. While the board mandated these decisions, they provided no extra funds to purchase the curricula. In a recent presentation on NCLB, government attorney Alisa Klein told the Sixth U.S. Court of Appeals panel that the intent of the law was never to fully fund the provisions laid out in No Child Left Behind law (Ohaninan, 2006). However, states had crafted budgets with the understanding that the federal government would be funding the law’s provisions. There was no money to supplement an already trimmed-to-the-bone budget.

Eliza Carey

Eliza, a fully credentialed and, therefore, highly qualified teacher, had been at Hope for five years, teaching a multi-aged Kindergarten–grade 2. The basal reading program selected by the district school board was scripted, necessitating a full set of classroom materials. Without these, Eliza could not carry out the board’s mandate. But not implementing the program could cause the school to incur sanctions if test scores did not rise. However, ignoring the mandate also had advantages. The scripted program did not accommodate the multi-age configuration of the school. Unless the entire school adjusted their reading schedules or adopted single-grade classrooms, Eliza would be forced to use the same curriculum for all

three grade levels. The program mandated by the school board required two and a half hours daily to implement. To do that program for three different grades was impossible, as it meant Eliza would need to spend seven hours daily on reading while the rest of the class worked independently. It also meant relegating social studies and science to a 40-minute time slot per week, even if she were teaching only one grade level.

Eliza loved teaching in a multi-age classroom for many reasons. This idea was supported by research she read (Darling-Hammond, 2004) and her own experience. Because one-third of her students had been with her for two years, she knew their strengths and weaknesses, so she could build from year to year. In addition, her older students oriented her new students to behavior and achievement expectations. Giving this responsibility to her older students established a positive learning environment. Since many students entered kindergarten with little or no preschool experience, Eliza needed all the help she could get to catch them up to grade-level expectations.

Eliza had been developing her own curricula for five years. She was prepared to tackle the challenge of raising her students’ test scores, but she didn’t want to use a script developed by a large publishing company in a distant city for a widely diverse population. William Ayers, one of her education professors, had written, “Teachers want to know the full measure of their students” (Ayers, 2001). She worked hard to make this ideal come alive in her classroom by checking in with the students and listening carefully to their stories. She also kept up with the latest research on meeting the educational needs of her population.

In accord with the philosophy of the school, which emphasized critical thinking, active learning, and fostering deep understanding of a subject, Eliza created and implemented her own curriculum focused on social justice. Students studied issues based on the experience and history of the African-American community and from there, made connections to broader issues of fairness and justice for all people. Her language arts curriculum was thoroughly integrated with social studies, as well as addressed the state and local language arts standards. She listened carefully to the students’ voices regarding their own interests. At one point, Eliza was prepared to begin a unit on the Civil Rights Movement, while her students expressed a desire to extend their current study of slavery. Eliza put it to a vote and the class voted 16 to 2 to continue to study slavery. Responding to the wishes of the class, Eliza researched a greater range of age appropriate material to deepen her students’ understanding of the topic.

Standardizing vs. Individualizing

John Shaw, principal of Hope School, was torn. NCLB’s goals mandated that every child will demonstrate that they meet state-defined standards as measured on a standardized test by

2014. In addition, schools, using the same measure, have to show “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) overall and for specific racial, low income, language learner, and special education subgroups. These subgroups represented the entire Hope Elementary population. In other words, his teachers had to deliver test scores that showed student competence in the state standards, narrowing the gap between their performance and that of middle class students in suburban schools.

In his administrative training, John had done some research on testing and school accountability. He remembered reading Linda Darling-Hammond’s recommendations for professional development, highly qualified teachers, and low-stakes testing (2004). In spite of what these researchers said, he felt he didn’t have much control over those issues.

It was John’s first year as principal, and his contract was for only one year. Previously, John had been a teacher at a similar school for seven years. The school had had five principals in the previous five years. John liked the Hope School environment for several reasons. The fact that parents chose the school meant they were involved and supportive. The teachers were dedicated, energetic, and cohesive. They were willing to experiment. He was determined to stay, but his contract renewal would be dependent on meeting the AYP criteria.

As a new principal, John was still getting to know his teachers and parent community. When he had been a fifth grade teacher, some of his African-American parents had objected to the study of slavery, arguing that it would harm their children’s self-esteem. He also worried that the vast majority of other schools in the district were using the board-approved curriculum. If students transferred, they would soon find that they had not received the same kind of preparation as students in their new school. Going with teacher-created material was a risk. If student test scores improved, the curriculum could become a model and the school would be removed from its probationary status. If the scores stayed the same or decreased, the onus would be on him, and he would likely lose his job. Eliza’s students had shown growth on the previous year’s standardized tests, but not enough growth to meet the “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) criteria. Good curriculum takes years to develop. It must be piloted and adjusted based on student performance. John didn’t have years.

In terms of the budget, the school could not afford to buy the mandated basal reading materials unless they let one of the teacher aids go. The aids came from the community. They were very active in advocating for the school at the district level in addition to providing needed individual attention to students.

John decided he had little choice but to take a risk with Eliza’s social justice curriculum. Most schools with his population of students were staffed by first-year or not fully credentialed teachers, yet many of his teachers were experienced, and he wanted to keep it that

way. As a former teacher, he knew he would lose them if he curtailed their independence and creativity.

The decision meant John would be monitoring Eliza’s classes carefully. This created some tension between them. He began continuously asking for updates and dropping into her classroom unannounced. Eliza now felt threatened, and John felt resentful of the time he was putting into monitoring her. He was already staying late into the evening keeping up with routine job requirements.

The Parents Weigh In

“Ms. Carey,” the woman puffed a little from the steep climb from the street to Eliza Carey’s classroom. “Jasmine just can’t stop talking about the dance she will be performing. She’s even asking me if I ever met Harriet Tubman. I had to tell her, ‘I’m not that old, honey.’” She guffawed amiably.

“I’ve certainly noticed a change in her attitude,” Eliza responded, smiling. “She finishes her math fact sheets more carefully now that she knows she can’t rehearse until she has at least 85% right. I hope you’ll be able to make it to the performance on Thursday evening, Ms. Johnson.”

“I surely will be there. I’m bringing her cousins from over there on Linden Street, too.”

“How exciting for Jasmine! Well, I’m looking forward to meeting them. Thanks for your support.”

Moments like these made teaching worthwhile. Eliza had been a little concerned over how the parents would respond to the new approach, but 14 of the 18 surveys she sent home came back. Of those, 12 were enthusiastic. Then there were the other two responses. One parent had been concerned that a nephew in another school was getting a very different curriculum. She wrote, “We might be moving out of the neighborhood. I want to make sure my child is going to be able to fit in at the new school. We didn’t have any of these plays and projects and I did just fine in school.” The second had questioned the necessity of teaching about “those times of struggle.” She wrote, “I want my child to feel empowered to face the future. Learning about all the hardships people went through might make him angry and bitter. I know things are going to be hard for him and the last thing I want is for him to be worn down by negativity.”

Eliza reassured the first parent that the same standards applied to both the district curriculum and her own, but the doubts lingered. It was true that once the children had experienced the freedom of a project and performance-based program, they might not adjust well to scripted, text-oriented methods. For the second parent, her answer wasn’t as easy. The children are asking to study this topic. The curriculum accommodates them, she thought.

The Board's Dilemma

The Lake City Public Schools were in a sensitive position. Urban school districts in the United States have diverse populations. Their demographics include large numbers of recent immigrants and low-income families. Since preschool programs have been severely cut, many children come to school under-prepared and fall further and further behind each year. In addition, recruitment of experienced teachers is difficult. Fully experienced, credentialed teachers tend to leave urban districts and other schools with low-income demographics. There is little incentive to stay in the inner city with a population under high stress levels when jobs are available in less challenging locations.

Schools in urban districts are particularly susceptible to sanctions based on NCLB requirements. In response to this situation, the Lake City Board of Education, like many boards across the country, responded to the teacher preparation issue by adopting scripted curricula. A teacher can stand in front of the classroom and deliver the reading program to her students without investing hours of research and development of individualized curriculum. Besides, there is evidence that, at least at the inception of the program, African-Americans, Latinos, and English Language Learners, the subgroups focused on by NCLB, showed growth in test scores. However, there seemed to be a drop off in growth in subsequent years. There is a great deal of transience and attendance problems in urban schools, and the decline in achievement after the first year may be attributed to these variables. Standardizing curricula across the district enabled the school board to create some kind of consistency in their delivery of curriculum and made monitoring of schools' progress simpler.

Dilemmas

Eliza Carey thinks she has addressed student's academic needs by motivating them with relevant curriculum. However, she is concerned that their standardized test scores will not reflect the progress she has seen in her classroom. Her interactions with the principal, who seems to question her every move are wearing her down, as well as the hours she puts in researching and creating new curricula. Sometimes she wonders whether it's worth it and if she shouldn't respond to her mother's entreaties to get a job in the suburb where she grew up.

John Shaw also worries. He wonders if he should make the necessary budget adjustments to buy the curriculum mandated by the district. He feels like he is fighting on two fronts. So far he has not heard any grumbling about Eliza's curriculum from parents, but he knows his accountability lies in the AYP results. Sometimes he thinks he should move into a policy position, although he knows he will miss the daily interaction with a school community.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What changes to NCLB would address the dilemma Eliza and John face?
- 2 What are the messages and assumptions about learning that NCLB sends the education community, the policymakers, and the taxpayers?
- 3 What are ways the community can be energized to address the tensions the school board, the school administration, and the teachers face?
- 4 How can well-prepared, experienced teachers be recruited to low-performing schools in urban districts?

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SUMMARIES OF 19 CASES

Full versions available at: www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases

Action Research: Impacting Results |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/ayers.htm

by **L. Kelly Ayers and Megan Garnett** • TNLI Mason (VA)

Against the backdrop of receiving a grant to conduct action research—focused on improving student research and writing skills across the curriculum—this case explores to what extent time and money should be made available for teacher collaboration. What are the roles and responsibilities for teachers and their schools related to professional development?

Are You In or Are You Out? |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/litke.htm

by **Erica Litke** • TNLI New York City

When, if ever, is it appropriate to counsel students out of school? Is a GED the same as a high school diploma—and is it a better option for some students rather than others? Do schools have a duty to prevent students from dropping out—especially when these students lower the pass rates by which schools are evaluated and/or receive funding? This case follows the lives of three very different secondary students, their teachers, and their principal at a medium-sized, urban high school.

Beyond the Test | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/gil.htm

by **Elizabeth Gil** • TNLI New York City

This case is about the limitations of high-stakes testing in demonstrating the academic growth of English Language Learners (ELL)—and its effects on a school’s ranking. When a principal invests in a less conventional method to improve ELL student achievement, rather than exclusively funding direct test preparation, what happens?

Cautious Hope and Chronically Failing Kids: What is the Answer? |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/jirsa.htm

by **Leslie Jirsa** • TNLI New York City

Set in an alternative high school for recent immigrants and “second-chance kids,” ranging from 17 to 21 years in age, this case considers what measures—especially in the context of increasingly limited school funding—can be taken to help this student population succeed... such as smaller classes, parent outreach, and/or advisory support. How do you graduate kids who would likely otherwise fail? Should we give up on them—and what are the consequences if we do?

Collaborative Learning Communities |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/seidel.htm

by **Deborah Q. Seidel** • TNLI Fairfax County (VA)

Defined as “educators committed to working together collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve,” this case looks at a county-wide, mandated program of Professional Learning Communities in every school—examining its benefits and drawbacks. It also poses questions such as: How does teacher collaboration take place outside of formal meetings, and what do specialists and general education teachers offer each other as they work together to improve overall student achievement?

The Dilemma of Choice | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/frank.htm

by **Elizabeth Frank, Brent Freecia, and Linda Hand** • TNLI Delaware

In a state in which all parents may choose the school best suited for their children, this case follows one couple’s journey. They are in the midst of a move to a new community, trying to make a fully informed decision about what school path is the “right” choice for their first grade child.

High Stakes for Low Scores? Is this Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning? | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/james.htm

by **Joanie James** • TNLI Wyoming

This case highlights many of the unintended consequences that have occurred as a result of NCLB legislation. Have one-size-fits-all curricula really become “a mile-wide and an inch-deep” in order to meet mandates set forth by this law? Have teachers been forced to focus almost exclusively on raising test scores of lower-level learners at the expense of higher-level learners? Are teachers also compelled to spend inordinate amounts of time doing test prep instead of

providing actual learning experiences for students? And what has happened to other subject areas such as social studies—not to mention the arts?

"I Hate School" | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/lee.htm

by **Oranne Lee** • TNLI Santa Barbara County (CA)

What happens to one child in a school putting all of its energy on an “improvement program” in response to NCLB mandates? This case raises major issues, including: balancing rote test preparation versus subject matter instruction, how to measure student progress that goes beyond standardized testing, and increased drop-out rates. At the heart of this case is the purpose of school and how to ensure that all students receive the best possible education.

Is Another Year Worth It? | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/ramirez.htm

by **Karen Ramirez** • TNLI New York City

Following the story of a student who ends up having to repeat the third grade, this case explores the issue of retention—weighing its benefits with its negative consequences. What is the process that leads to making the decision for retention? When is it appropriate to hold a student back, and what should be done to help a child achieve during the time when a student repeats a grade? Further issues addressed in this case include how and when standardized tests should be used related to holding a student back, and how can teachers best work with parents, especially those who don’t speak English, when serious issues such as retention arise.

Leaving the Minorities Behind | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/ward.htm

by **Patti Ward** • TNLI Miami / The Ed Fund (FL)

This case is about how NCLB, in general, and the FCAT, specifically, impact student retention, and their ramifications on students, teachers, and parents. It illustrates the challenges school communities face as they grapple with how to meet state and federal high-stakes testing benchmarks.

Que paso...What is happening here? |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/bledsoe.htm

by **Linda Bledsoe, Gemma Cabrera, Sharon Crossen, Denise Snyder, and Whitney Price** • TNLI Delaware

In the wake of NCLB and similar pressures, a newly mandated statewide curriculum will hit Middleford Middle School—a school that has been scoring “at the bottom of the pile” on standardized test scores in recent years. The plot thickens as teachers and administrators

alike wonder how to improve student achievement and keep parents from removing students from their school, especially when faced with a dramatically changing ethnic and socioeconomic demographic.

School Reform and Teacher Collaboration |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/connelly.htm

by **Maureen Connelly** • TNLI New York City

By examining the climate at an urban school in its third year of restructuring as part of a state review, and now facing NCLB mandates, a number of burning questions are posed—all of which affect the future direction of the school. How can schools with major populations of English Language Learners best deal with students’ needs and all the mandates at the same time? To what extent can collaborative learning communities of teachers be established—and how can teachers be supported in assuming greater leadership roles? Also, how might parents become more involved?

Something Has to Give | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/kopchains.htm

by **Amy Kopchains** • TNLI New York City

Brightonville School for the Arts is a middle school housed in a 100-year old building that is also home to an elementary school. Using this school as a setting, this case raises a series of important questions of how best to offer resource room/specialized instruction for students with special needs, such as: Should these services be delivered within a classroom or a separate location? How do small schools that share service providers ensure that services are delivered appropriately? And how do special education and general education teachers coordinate schedules and curricula in order to maximize achievement for all students?

A Time of Test | www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/thompson.htm

by **Laura Thompson, Karen Rabik, Chris Mclean, Sherlynn Aurelio, Susan Edgell** • TNLI Delaware

What do we value? This case is about priorities, especially how to use school time. It juxtaposes the value of providing authentic and challenging learning experiences with the pressure to devote months of school time almost exclusively to test preparation. It also addresses the consequences that result from the choices schools are now being forced to make.

To Be or Not to Be... Reading |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/gadsby.htm

by **Richard A. Gadsby** • TNLI New York City

Set in an underperforming urban middle school, this case delves into how some members of a school staff deal with motivating students to read, especially boys who have otherwise responded to little else, through a new reading program, including building a library that offers more choice for students. Looming heavy in the air is always the pressure of the state exam—and the consequences of this test for the school. But, should actual student progress take a back seat to test scores? And how do we evaluate students who make academic progress but fail to meet the performance standards?

Unintended Consequences of No Child Left Behind |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/kirkpatrick.htm

by **Chad Kirkpatrick** • Chicago (IL)

In this case, a Chicago public school teacher ponders a newspaper headline—“NCLB”—and reflects upon how the application of this legislation has negatively impacted his special needs students. Faced with multiple state and federal testing expectations for this population—often running counter to the goals of their Individualized Education Plans that are, themselves, created by other federal legislation (i.e., the Individuals with Disabilities Act)—the major issue raised is how assessments can better relate to student needs.

When Did We Stop Calling Him Billy? |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/batiste.htm

by **Mildred Batiste, Lorraine Caputo, Marsha Evans, Tom Koliss,**

Travis Moorman, Esther Roberts • TNLI Delaware

Billy, a sixth grade special education student, experiences a “meltdown” that contributes to his poor performance on a single state assessment. This case portrays the extreme pressures that schools now face, and the dire, long-term consequences for students. In an environment in which children are now referred to by their test scores instead of their names, the question is also posed: Do schools now value performance over understanding and learning?

Where Do We Go From Here? ¿Adónde Vamos? |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/link.htm

by **Holly Link** • TNLI San Francisco (CA)

Set in the context of a two-way Spanish-English immersion school facing dramatic demographic

changes, this case demonstrates a growing disconnect between the delivery of bilingual education and the demands of high-stakes testing. While research suggests that two-way immersion programs benefit students over time, short-term accountability pressures, compounded by a constant influx of new immigrants, are putting these programs at risk.

You'll All Look Good on Page 39 (or else!) |

www.teachersnetwork.org/tnli/cases/gold.htm

by **Susan Gold** • TNLI San Francisco (CA)

Comparing buying a one-size outfit for all customers to a one-size-fits-all scripted curriculum for all students, this case examines how an experienced teacher and a new principal struggle with risks associated with providing creative, individualized instruction. The key issues are how a community can address the new demands toward standardization and how to keep teachers with excellent track records in low-performing schools in urban districts so that all students can achieve.



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