

Que Paso... What is Happening Here?

By: Linda Bledsoe, Gemma Cabrera, Sharon Crossen, Denise Snyder and Whitney Price, TNLI Fellows, Delaware

Middleford Middle School

“Welcome to Middleford Middle School,” Mr. Monroe said as he greeted the latest additions to the staff on the first day of school. “We are proud of our outstanding staff and, of course, of our student body. We have a long history of producing the best and expecting nothing less.”

Sylvia Jones thought to herself that she hoped she could live up these expectations. When she arrived in Middleford for the first time to search for a place to live, she noticed many vacant buildings and homes that had been neglected for some time. Her sister had remarked about the look of the town as they drove to the school office. “What makes you want to work in a place like this? It looks as if this town is being run by immigrants. Do they even speak English here?” Sylvia told her sister not to worry, but, in truth, she was worried herself. How could she even begin to reach such high expectations when her future students didn’t speak the same language as she did? How was she going to speak to their parents and explain the importance of what she was expecting from their children? She only hoped that she would find a veteran teacher to mentor her and make her feel at ease in this new situation.

The next day, Sylvia met Sally Warner. Sally was a lifelong resident of Middleford and knew everyone in town. Everyone, that is, who had been born and raised there. She didn’t know the newcomers. Sylvia and Sally hit it off instantly and one day, on the hour-long drive to the mall, Sally had explained the changes in the town to Sylvia. “Middleford was once a farming town where everyone knew or was related to everyone else. We were a family and we enjoyed being that way. We lived off our land and provided for each other and ourselves. Then the chicken plant came to town. At first, everyone thought it was a good thing. It would provide jobs for those who couldn’t produce enough on their own to support the lifestyles they wanted. The poultry industry is demanding and the local workers didn’t like working for their current wages and putting in all those hours. I am afraid that we caused this shift in the community ourselves.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sylvia.

“Well,” replied Sally. “The chickens had to be processed and those from the town weren’t able to keep up with the demand. The company began to look elsewhere for workers. One place they began to look was South America. Soon, there were workers from elsewhere coming to Middleford and doing jobs that the locals didn’t want to do. These workers brought their families and our farming town became a town driven by the poultry industry.”

“Wow,” Sylvia sighed. “The whole make-up of the town must have changed very quickly.”

“Yes, it did. Almost overnight, Middleford went from being a Caucasian, agricultural town to a predominantly Hispanic community. Local farmers were no longer the hub of the economy of the town. Now the poultry industry was supplying most of the jobs in the area and they were in control,” Sally explained. “This school changed, almost overnight, to being a racially and culturally diverse Title I school with over half of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. We once had only 40 English Language Learners (ELL), but now we have 240. That took place in little more than 5 years. And it hasn’t stopped yet.”

On the drive back to her apartment, Sylvia wondered what was in store for her as the school year progressed. It had been several months since Sally had enlightened her about the

changing demographics of the town she now called home. She asked herself the same nagging questions, like how she was ever going to reach and teach these kids? Will what she is doing be enough to help them be successful on those state tests? She hoped that she was doing the right thing.

Sylvia prepared for teaching the same way she always had since coming to Middleford Middle School in September. The only difference was that now it was May and the state test results were out. What was this day going to hold for her? She could only wonder.

### A Day in the Life

“Here he goes again. Look, he is bringing a newspaper article to tell us what we already know,” Sally Warner said to James Jackson at the beginning of a faculty meeting.

“How do you know what he’s going to say?” Betty Jones asked her mentor, Evelyn Paul, sitting beside her.

“We already know we’re at the bottom of the state school rankings,” replied Angie Thayer, “and according to *Education Today*, parents who are dissatisfied with their schools will pull their students out and send them to other schools.”

“Good afternoon, staff. I just returned from the central office where I met with Dr. Smith, our Director of Instruction. Unfortunately, once again, our test scores are keeping Middleford at the bottom of the pile. This, as you know, is unacceptable.” Everyone sighed and looked at each other wondering what was coming next. “First and foremost, let me assure you that what I am about to say is nothing new to any of you. The idea of a centralized curriculum has been tossed around for quite some time. Those days of tossing are over. Beginning in the fall, the mandated state curriculum that has been floating in cyberspace will take effect.”

“Why is everyone so upset?” asked Betty Jones, “I think the idea of having a mandated curriculum makes my job easier. The hands-on materials included in the Smithsonian and Foss Science Kits are easy to use and the kids love them. They learn so much from these kits and they *have* improved our test scores in Science.”

“But Betty, you don’t understand,” replied Jack Handy. “A mandated curriculum will simply kill the diverse population at this school. We know from experience that these kids need to be taught in an entirely different manner and at a pace that is not always what the “experts” prescribe. Not only that, they will send people to see if we are doing what we say we are doing. That means *walk-throughs* where they’ll look for what *they* think *we* should be doing.”

Principal Monroe continued, “Now remember, we will be working together with all of you to devise a schedule for professional development. You will be working in teams with your department members and also across grade levels to help you implement this new curriculum. As you all know, professional development is a key factor in our success.”

Miss Sophie tentatively raised her hand, “But Mr. Monroe, we have worked so hard this year and our scores are still not improving. What do we have to do to help these kids? How many times do we have to change the curriculum? I’ve been around long enough to have seen that the pendulum swings back and forth. Another curriculum change is not the answer.”

Mr. Monroe sighed heavily and continued, “I know you are all working hard, but parents are beginning to pull out their students from our school and are sending them elsewhere. Student enrollment generates our funding. You all know that. Without the students, we have no school. Without a school, we have no jobs. Remember, we are all in this together.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Monroe, there is a call for you on line two,” Miss Baker announced over the intercom.

“Can’t it wait? We’re kind of in the middle of an important meeting right now,” Mr. Monroe said rather impatiently.

“Umm, no, I think you’d better take this now!” Ms. Baker answered.

Mr. Monroe adjourned the meeting and explained that they would continue the discussion at the in-service training meeting the next morning. Rushing down the hall to his office, he noticed the red light was flashing incessantly on his phone as he sat down at his desk with a heavy sigh. Hesitating somewhat, he thought...I don’t want to take this call. However, he picked up the phone and said, “Mr. Monroe speaking.”

The voice at the other end of the phone sounded agitated and concerned, “Hello, Mr. Monroe. This is Mrs. Mason, John Mason’s mother. I’m calling because I just read today’s headlines. Once again, Middleford Middle School is ranked at the bottom of the ratings. I’m trying to convince my husband that Middleford is not a failing school, but he only pays attention to the headlines.”

“I understand your concern...” Mr. Monroe replied.

“No, I don’t think you do understand. My husband thinks John needs to go to a school where there aren’t so many needy kids.”

“Let me assure you, Mrs. Mason, that we have high expectations for all of our students and everyone receives quality instruction here at Middleford. We are currently in the process of implementing a centralized curriculum that has been mandated by the state. No matter where John goes to school, the curriculum will be the same. All of our teachers are highly qualified and John repeatedly scores fours and fives on the state test, which tells me that John’s teachers are effective. Our next PTO meeting is scheduled for Thursday. We would like to invite you and Mr. Mason to attend. We will be discussing the new state-wide mandated curriculum and how that will affect our students and ultimately our test scores.”

“Thank you, Mr. Monroe, but I don’t think that information will do any good. He wants action and he wants it now. Frankly, we both do. We came to this town believing that our children would be in some of the best schools—and now that’s not happening. Just what do you intend to do about this mess? We’d both like some answers now.” Mrs. Mason hung up the phone rather abruptly.

Now I’ve really got to do my homework, Mr. Monroe thought to himself. I’d better be prepared for any type of question they may throw at me.

Mr. Monroe grabbed his coat and headed for the parking lot. As he was unlocking his car door, Jose approached him with his soccer teammates. “¿Mr. Monroe, vas a venir al juego esta noche?”

“Si, of course, I’m coming to your game. I wouldn’t miss it. You guys have been playing great!”

“¿Somos numero uno!” shouted the players.

Mr. Monroe smiled and shouted back to the boys, “We certainly are.” As he pulled out of the parking, he thought of how to convince everyone else of that.

### Discussion Questions

1. What can the teachers and administrators in this school do to improve communication with the ELL students?
2. How can teachers and administrators improve parent involvement?