

Meeting the Needs of Students—It’s More Than Just Your ABCs¹

Elizabeth Gil

Teachers Network Leadership Institute, New York Affiliate

"I asked the principal about Carlos staying another year, but Mrs. Bender told me, 'He scored a level 2—he graduates.' He wanted to stay in eighth grade another year also. Carlos knew that he couldn't cut it in high school. Last week, they found him in the park boozed up," Mr. Pilot spoke calmly, but the sadness he felt was evident in his voice.

Jennifer Justiniano shook her head as the two teachers poured over the exams they were grading. "That doesn't say much for teaching the whole child, does it? What does it say when a student himself recognizes that he needs more time and support in order to really be ready, but he's pushed along because he 'approached'—didn't even 'meet'—but 'approached' the standard?² Our kids need more mentoring. As teachers, we can do a certain amount of encouraging and guiding, but our kids need more, and not always academic help, but someone to listen to them, maybe even to encourage them and to tell them, 'look even if this isn't going great, you can still succeed. There are a lot of possibilities out there.' They need to see more models, to have people that have a relationship with them outside of the school building. And with all the students high school guidance counselors serve, how much support and attention do you think Carlos got when he arrived in high school?"

"I think if Carlos had stayed here another year, he would have been better prepared. He knew he would end up dropping out. He could see it coming already," Mr. Pilot said, reaching for a newly sharpened pencil among the stacks of exams.

Jennifer Justiniano and Endeavor Academy

In her four years of teaching at Endeavor Academy, a pre-k to eighth grade school, Jennifer Justiniano has seen many of her students graduate, and even though they graduate from eighth grade, she knows of many Endeavor graduates who did not go on to complete their high school education. In fact, fewer than four out of ten Bronx high schoolers actually do graduate with their cohort³ and this is if they graduate at all. Ms. Justiniano started out her career as an elementary grades special education teacher and has spent the last four years as a Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS) teacher⁴ working with part-time special education students in grades six through eight. Each year that she has worked closely with these students she has recognized more and more of their needs—not only on an academic, but on a social and an emotional level. Thinking of where she might be able to make the greatest impact in these students' lives, she has decided to work toward a second master's degree, this time in

¹ Materials for this case were taken extensively from *I'm Going to College at 13: The Impact of Middle-School College Tours* conducted by Richard Gadsby, MetLife Fellow, Teachers Network Leadership Institute, June 2006.

² On New York State assessments, student performance levels are defined as follows: Level 1 – Not Meeting Learning Standards, Level 2– Partially Meeting Learning Standards, Level 3–Meeting Learning Standards, Level 4– Meeting Learning Standards with Distinction; <http://schools.nyc.gov/daa/ScaleScores/default.asp>

³ Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (2007). *Is the NYC Department Of Education 'Planning For Failure?'* <http://www.northwestbronx.org/news1.html> Retrieved May, 9, 2008. "In the case of the Bronx, only 36% of students survive to senior year as a cohort in the Grier Partnership projections."

⁴ Special Education Teacher Support Services are specially designed, supplemental instruction provided by a special education teacher who may work directly with a student with a disability to support participation in a general education classroom, and/or indirectly with the student's general education teacher to adjust the learning environment and/or modify and adapt instructional techniques and methods to meet the student's individual needs. <http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/pubs/2005/newcontinuum.pdf>

educational administration. She loves teaching, but knows that many crucial decisions impacting educators and their students are not made by educators in the classroom, but by their supervisors and other administrators.

Teaching at Endeavor Academy in the South Bronx in the poorest Congressional district in the nation has its challenges, but Justiniano has loved working there with wonderful students and dedicated colleagues who serve the 515 middle school students. For a New York City school, 515 students is considered small, but even at this size, there is a lot to manage. Ninety-two percent of students are Title I-eligible. Composed of 57% Hispanic and 42% Black students, with small numbers of White and Asian students, the school's students represent a variety of countries and languages. Fifteen percent of the school's students are English Language Learners (ELLs), and 18% are special education students. Of this 18%, about 5% are also ELLs. Endeavor's proportion of transient students is very high and the AIDS rate in the community is 3.5 times higher than the national average. The murder rate in the community is two times the city average. Endeavor Academy also has the lowest graduation rate in the city.

Friday Afternoon

As Ms. Justiniano walked to the train station to embark on her one-and-a-half hour commute from the South Bronx to Brooklyn that afternoon, she could not stop thinking about how, with all the efforts her colleagues expended, teachers, paraprofessionals, the guidance counselor, and others in the school, it still wasn't enough. What could her school do to really meet her students' needs—not just the academic ones. As a Special Education Teacher Support Service (SETSS) teacher over the years, she'd seen more and more that emotional and basic needs and supports were what students needed in addition to the academics. She always knew it to some extent—that kids had a lot to deal with—but in the past few years it had impacted her greatly just how many bright, but troubled children walked through her classroom doors. Big problems in little bodies—it's amazing that they cope as well as they do. I'm astounded by how resilient our students are. I have not seen half of what some of my sixth graders have to try to manage! We need to be realistic about what we're facing and I'm not talking about the AYP,⁵ Ms. Justiniano thought to herself as she reached the train station and walked up to the elevated platform. She smiled at finding an empty seat, and thought, let the weekend begin!

Monday Morning

"Hi, Jenny! How was your weekend?" asked Suzanne Morales, Endeavor Academy's guidance counselor with a smile as they walked into the school building.

"It was more relaxing than I thought it would be. I went home so drained on Friday after scoring all those tests and I had to meet with my class group over the weekend, but it was all right. Actually I wanted to talk to you about an idea I had over the weekend. We've got kids who turn to gangs to be their families, are facing AIDS directly on a daily basis, who don't think that there is such a thing as 15 years down the road, setting goals, making plans. I think our kids want to do well, but sometimes putting more energy into tests and academics—that's a luxury with everything else competing in their lives. So, I started talking to one of the guys in my admin class. He teaches in Brooklyn and was talking about something they started in his middle

⁵ Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is "the minimum level of performance that school districts and schools must achieve to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act. AYP is determined at both the district and school level and both for Title I and Non-Title I schools and districts." <http://www.capregboces.org/instrucservices/NCLB/terms.htm#AYP>

school.” Seeing the smirk that often came over Suzanne’s face when she was thinking up some sly remark, Justiniano said, “Okay, I see that look you’re giving me...”

“What is it? What did they come up with? I can see that twinkle in your eye,” Suzanne teased.

“Well, they take their students to colleges and let them see what kinds of things they have to do to get ready for college. These kids go out of the city and meet with college students themselves. Sometimes these college students are grads who attended that very same middle school. At the same time, the middle schoolers met as a group in the school and it made a difference in their school work, so it shows the program had short-and long-term effects. The students were building relationships—positive ones and the experience makes college seem more attainable in the long-run, too. I even did a little more reading—yes, I know, I’m a geek.” Ms. Justiniano added, “That’s how I spend my *free* time—ha, ha!”

“That sounds good, Jenny. It certainly helps strengthen the support network. I can definitely buy into that! Sounds like something to present at the School Leadership Team⁶ meeting.” Looking at the clock on the wall, Suzanne winced and said, “Well, I have to run. I’ll see you later. Good luck!”

“Thanks,” answered Ms. Justiniano with a smile slowly taking over her face, “I like that idea. I’m going to do it. I’ll tell Max so we can put it on the agenda for this week’s team meeting. Thanks, Suze!” Ms. Justiniano walked toward her room with a spring in her step.

School Leadership Team Meeting – Wednesday Afternoon

Ms. Justiniano began presenting her idea to the School Leadership Team, making sure not to speak too quickly, despite her excitement. “In considering our school population, how important education after high school is for our students’ futures and how we can support our students’ success early, I am presenting a college tour program for our middle schoolers.”

Almost before she could finish talking about the idea, Mrs. Jones, the parent of one of Endeavor’s middle school students was shaking her head. “The job of the school is to teach the children, not to raise them. It’s my job to raise my child and to decide when we start talking about college. I’m the one who should be helping to set the goals. Our job here on this team is to talk about academic issues for the kids. This isn’t really academic and it would cost the school a lot of money.”

Ms. Justiniano could feel the heat rising up through her cheeks and she wondered for a second if steam was now visibly coming out of the top of her head or out of her ears. She noticed that Mr. Castro, the father of a current Endeavor student and an Endeavor graduate, looked like he wanted to say something, but he sat silent. His expression was not lost on Ms. Justiniano. She could not let the plan be dismissed so easily. “Actually, Mrs. Jones, research has shown that there is positive short- and long-term impact of this kind of initiative on students.”

A little calmer, but still adamant, Mrs. Jones responded, “Still, I say that teachers and the school have the job of teaching to do. Our school should be working on state test scores and on scoring higher on the report card—the progress report now, not for three or seven years from now. The high schools already work to get kids to graduate, and like I said, the rest is a parent’s job. I know this and that’s what we do for Alexa and Darwin and it’s what we did for Teddy,

⁶ “The School Leadership Team (SLT) is a collaborative school-based team of parents, teachers, staff, and the principal that is mandated by New York State law to play a significant role as an advisory panel in representing the school community. The SLT helps create structures for school-based decision making, develops school-based educational policies, and ensures resources are aligned to implement those policies. The School Leadership Team writes and reviews the school’s Comprehensive Education Plan (CEP).” <http://www.ps41.org/pages/ps0505-slt.html>

too. He's a junior in college now and he graduated from here. There are programs outside the school that can do that."

With her acute awareness that Mrs. Jones was not only a parent, but was also a community board member, Mrs. Bender, Endeavor's principal, silently watched the exchange. She thought that if Mrs. Jones' response was any indication of the general perception about the program Ms. Justiniano proposed, then perhaps it was best to leave things alone and not pursue the program at all. She couldn't—she shouldn't—just move on this on her own. Any initiative at Endeavor required funding and many hours of people putting in time. Time and money always had to be at the forefront of her decision-making. Mrs. Bender remembered the conversation she had with Mr. Ali, the school's budget manager. Mr. Pilot had come to her, quite concerned about Carlos Martinez. Listening to Mr. Pilot, Mrs. Bender really had considered retaining Carlos in eighth grade, but after talking to Mr. Ali, she just couldn't. Her final decision had been a "no." Holding Carlos back would have meant spending more money and what if it was a strike against the school on the progress report? Even more, with a precedent set, it might open the floodgates for other kids who were just afraid to go to high school. She couldn't afford that, even if she wanted to do it. Her attention returning back to the School Leadership Team meeting, Principal Bender had that uncomfortable feeling again.

Ms. Justiniano wished that someone else would say something, anything. She resented Mrs. Bender's silence. She knew that the proposal had merit and could make a difference. The class bell rang, signaling the next period and end of the meeting. There was no time for more discussion.

After the meeting, Ms. Justiniano went up to Mr. Castro. "Mr. Castro, how's Leslie? Is she enjoying high school? How is she adjusting?"

"She's okay. I think she likes it, but she says it's so big. She likes it though. She's on the school newspaper. She works so hard. I see her when I get home in the night."

"She always did like to write," smiled Ms. Justiniano. "I was wondering, what you thought of the idea I presented."

"Oh, I don't think I should say anything. Mrs. Jones, she says a lot for everybody," answered Mr. Castro somewhat shyly.

"But on the team, everyone's supposed to have a voice, everyone's supposed to be equal. I know what an effort you have made all these years to be involved, that you work so many hours. I know that you make your schedule so that you can be here for our monthly meetings. Your opinion counts, too."

Mr. Castro had gotten to know Ms. Justiniano over the last four years and knew he could speak honestly with her. "Well, I really like it. My wife and me, we didn't go to college. We almost finished high school in Honduras but we still want that for Leslie and for Marcos. We talk to them about college for a very long time—since they are little. Education is very important to us. We know coming here is what helps our children to succeed in their future. But still, Marta and me, we don't always know what else we should do always. I'm sorry Ms. Justiniano, I have to go back to work. Thank you for thinking of our children's future. You have always been like that." He smiled as he walked away.

"Thanks, Mr. Castro. Please say hi to Leslie and to Mrs. Castro for me." As she walked up the stairs, she reminded herself: This is why you do it, Jenny, this is why.

Lunchtime Thursday

"Suze, I figured that even though this would take time to put together and would take a lot of work, it's still doable." Ms. Justiniano put her lunch into the microwave and continued.

“We need to consider real solutions and not just band-aids. It’s not as if I proposed a major overhaul of the public school system. I just believe that we’d be able to help our kids a lot more if we partnered with organizations, if we thought further ahead and maintained high expectations while actually guiding our students toward them. Families would benefit from it, too. I mentioned the long-and short-term effects,” her voice trailed off.

“I’m sorry Jenny. Not everyone has the same vision. I would have thought that they’d like it, but remember, Mrs. Jones is just one person.” Suzanne patted Ms. Justiniano on the back and removed her lunch from the refrigerator.

Ms. Justiniano continued, almost as though her thoughts were elsewhere. “I was just so taken aback by the opposition—and no one said anything, not one word. I talked to Mr. Castro afterwards and he **does** think it is a good idea. I think he felt intimidated, though. Mrs. Jones is really vocal. He doesn’t have the resources that she does...and imagine the kids who don’t even have a Mr. and Mrs. Castro in their lives. The Castros at least offer their kids some kind of direction and so much caring even if they don’t have the whole road map. It just makes me upset that in this school we don’t do more systematically—I know that we do it as caring individuals, but we can do more. We can do it better.”

The frustration could be heard in Ms. Justiniano’s voice now. “In my admin classes, they talk about thinking out of the box, about the kids being the thing we need to think about the most, and also about developing a vision. This tour is just that—and it has even been done somewhere else, so it’s not that far-fetched. Do I have to wait to have my own school to see something like this happen? Do I have to leave here to do it? I believe that this can work. I bet if we could get three or four other teachers who’d want to do this too...and Mrs. Bender just sat there. She just sat there.” Ms. Justiniano slammed her water bottle on the table.

“I can’t say I have the answer, Jenny, but if anyone can make this happen, I know it’s you. You have my support in anything I can do. I hope you know that. I know you’re really upset but don’t give up. This system needs you and you **are** making a difference with the kids, really.”

“Thanks, Suzanne, but this isn’t the first time something like this has happened. Every year, I see more and more that teachers’ good ideas are just not given much weight around here. I don’t know if it’s about money, fear or what. If it is the money, then I hate all this bottom line versus what’s right balancing game all the time. I’ve always thought I make a difference here, but now I just feel like, like...there has to be more than this!” Suzanne recognized the fire in Ms. Justiniano’s eyes and she closed her food container and stood up. “Maybe I need to be where I can focus on some of the root issues and not just hitting the symptoms. I can try to prepare students academically and *sometimes* I’m able to offer moral support and counsel and guidance. Maybe I need to be somewhere else—maybe a nonprofit, some other community organization. Why am I getting this administration master’s if I have to pay more attention to straight numbers than I do to children and what they need. In class, my professors say ‘remember that you’re there for the kids’ and still this, *this* is what I see every day. I’ve got some big decisions to make by June.”

Suzanne’s eyes widened and her disappointment was instant when she heard this. She’d seen Ms. Justiniano upset before, but this time something was different. Losing Ms. Justiniano meant losing a real champion for students. Months ago, when Ms. Justiniano shared with her that she was pursuing a degree in administration, Suzanne had felt uplifted. “Jenny’s just the kind of administrator the system needs,” she had told herself. “If Jenny’s got this much fire to help kids as a teacher, there’s even more that she can do as an assistant principal or a principal.” If Jenny did leave, it wouldn’t be the first time in her 15 years working in the system that Suzanne would see a gem of an educator go. A long, heavy sigh escaped from her and she felt a deep

twinge of sadness. As she pushed in her chair and headed to her next meeting with a parent, she said out loud, “There goes another advocate for kids and for the rest of us, too.”

QUESTIONS

1. What might Ms. Justiniano do from within her role as a teacher to develop the college-visit program?
2. What strategies could Ms. Justiniano employ to develop allies at her school?
3. How can Ms. Justiniano deal effectively with the members of the School Leadership Team?
4. What mechanisms might be put in place so that all members of School Leadership Teams, or any school-based teams, feel they have a voice in decision-making?