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Is it worth it?

Before First Bell at Garden School, 8:00 a.m., January 21st

Ms. Rose and Ms. Jean-Pierre, two parents at the Garden School, walked their kids to breakfast in the cafeteria. Every morning, they liked to sit and catch up with all the news and gossip of the day.

As the kids were getting their breakfast, Ms. Jean-Pierre asked Ms. Rose, “How’d you like that math homework last night? It was hard to get Max to finish the 30 problems and then write an answer to the narrative essay question. We thought it’d be quicker to do the math first but once he started, I don’t know. He’s complaining of headaches and having trouble sleeping. Gee, he’s only in fourth grade. Now the pressure is starting to affect my third grader. She is so upset by the fact she may not pass the third-grade test and have to repeat third grade. She begins complaining of a stomach ache. I took her to the doctor last week just to be sure and he says nothing is wrong. He sees a lot of FCAT-ITIS in January and February – crunch time.”

Ms. Rose sighed, “Crunch time – smunch time! I know some kids probably need it but 30 problems and an essay! Rebecca asked me last night why she had to do 30 problems if she could do the first 10 the right way and all the other ones were like the first 10. I told her it was practice and the teacher did assign it as homework, so I said just do it, but she said she was sick and tired. She just wants to stop practicing and take the darn test! Titus—you know my fifth grader—says he can’t wait to get to the fun learning stuff that’s in the back of the book that makes you practice everything you’re supposed to know anyway. He’s tired of being called out of P.E. for his weekly conference and follow-up practice about his so-called FCAT prep tests.”

“Talking about that, how can they pull the kids out of P.E.? Isn’t it a mandate or something that all the kids have to have P.E.? I spoke to his teacher at Open House and she said she didn’t have time to do the conferences during the rest of the day. The kids have to get ready for the test and all the time is structured. I was talking to my brother the other day and his kids are at Grove School right down the street from here. His oldest is in fifth, and he’s involved in a project with his class learning about their family heritage. The kid is doing research and his reading and writing skills have improved. His attitude is great! He’s having fun and my brother is so involved in helping him. His kid isn’t feeling any stress, and he’s learning lots without that homework struggle. Every night he comes home and hits the books first. I think the teacher is Ms. Ward. Why can’t we do something like that here? I’ll be glad when March is over, and I’ll have my old kids back,” replies Ms. Jean-Pierre.

Ms. Rose agrees with a sigh. “What a shame! Hey, I have an EESAC (Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee) meeting today after school. Why don’t you come with me and we’ll tell it like it is?”

“No way, yuck, all those teachers there on that committee. Just what my kid needs. I went once last year and all they did was tell us what they were doing—they don’t want to know what we think they should do. When I speak up, I feel like they’re just going to take it out on my kids. After all we’re only parents and most of us don’t speak

¹ Based on *Celebrate Us!*, an action research project by Patti Ward (TNLI MetLife Fellow), 2007.

English very well at that. I don't have a degree. No way!" shaking her head as she left for home.

Ms. Rose chuckled to herself, "Well, today I'm going to speak my mind or whatever is left of it. After all, they are my kids."

Garden School

Garden School was a large, urban Title I elementary school, pre-k through fifth grade, with a total of 916 students including a large special education center of 160 students who were identified as exceptional education students. Most of the children were ELL (English Language Learners), the primary home language being Creole. School notices were sent home in English, Creole, and Spanish. Automated school-wide telephone messages are made to all households to notify parent of testing schedules and meetings. The composition of the student population at the school was 1.3% White, 84% African-American, 12.8% Latino, 1.3% White, 0.4%, Asian, 0.1% American Indian, and 1.4% multi-racial.

The agendas for EESAC (Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee) meeting, held on the fourth Wednesday of the month after school, were posted in the main hallway and media center doorways. Four parents sat on the EESAC along with five teachers, the administrator, and union representative.

The 2006-07 school year brought a new principal, Ms. Grace, and a new assistant principal Ms. Jones. The new administration brought many changes, but the school maintained its state grade of C. In 2007, Garden School was designated as SINI II, a School In Need of Improvement for the third year because annual yearly gains were not met in the 2006-2007 year. The school district sent teams of professionals in all subject areas to assist in improving instruction by modeling lessons, guiding teachers in the process of implementing the district's pacing guides, and mentoring of staff. Tutors pulled out students in grades three to five for 30-minute sessions daily. After school, on-site tutoring by a private company paid for by Title I funds was put in place in September 2007 for students. The students are placed in the tutoring program by parent request and then by teacher recommendation. If the school did not make annual yearly gains this year, the school would be sent even more teams from the school district to provide assistance.

The school staff was committed to transforming Garden School. The mid-year assessment scores increased in reading, writing, and math. Science scores remained the same. At the end of the school year, the sixth grade was moved to the middle school on the shared campus. Fewer teachers transferred from Garden School compared to previous years. Parent involvement was minimal, consisting solely of the 10-20 parents that came to every PTA and Parent Academy meeting.

Picnic Tables—Outside of the Cafeteria and Lounge – Noon – Lunch Time

Sally, Lila, Sue, and Carol had lunch together everyday even though they taught different grade levels. They loved eating outside at the picnic tables because they could discuss practically anything they wanted without fear of being overheard. They had become a small learning community—mentoring and encouraging each other—and all working on advanced degrees. Besides the weather was always great! Sally was a third-year, third grade teacher. Lila, a veteran teacher, taught fourth grade. Sue, also a veteran

and dearly loved for her enthusiasm, was the one and only art teacher. Carol had recently moved to fifth grade, having been a very effective first grade teacher for five years.

The lunch bunch was already seated when Sue rushed over. The gang chimed in, “Hey Sue! How’s your day going? You look like you’re upset and gee, it’s only noon!”

Sue said, “Don’t even ask! My fourth grade last period was so frustrating. I have these great kids who love art. They are so creative and enthusiastic! We were working on a project for the youth fair, and eight kids got pulled for tutoring. Last week, another group was pulled for the weekly FCAT weekly conference. You know this happens all the time – and the sad part of it is that they are good in art, and they need this so they can feel good about themselves. We only have art one day a week. Why can’t they rotate the tutoring and conferencing schedules so the same kids don’t have to miss it all the time? I just hope they don’t feel rejected. I’m doing my literacy review for action research on disruptive children in the classroom and I found research by Hartup that says rejected children are more likely to be aggressive and disruptive in school. I think the closer we get to FCAT, the more hostile the kids are getting. And those who are normally okay are getting aggressive, too.”

Sally piped in, “Well, from my human development class I found out Erickson’s research says that seeing that every student has some successful experience in the classroom can be important for helping students develop their personality. Administration should support us and the kids more by holding the special class times sacred.”

Sue said, “I can only wish! I know for a fact that the music and the P.E. teachers feel the same way. The arts are a great way for kids to have success. Having this success will help them in academic achievement. I only wish that the powers that be would see it that way.”

Lila added, “It seems like we’re asking these kids to be successful when they’re dealing with the feelings of not being accomplished and not doing things well because they’re not having an opportunity to practice what comes natural to them at this age. Wow! Remember those feelings of inferiority that we see every day in their attitudes. They are eight and nine. If I remember Erickson properly from my undergrad readings he says kids really just want to please and be recognized. Just doesn’t make sense. Doesn’t anyone remember what it’s like to be this age and the problems that come with it?”

Sally sighed, “I’m working with my kids, teaching them social skills, and assisting them in experiencing recognition for their accomplishments and achievement. We always celebrate our successes. I try to empower them by giving them some control over their environment and learning, without that I’d have motivation and conduct problems coming out of the kazoo. Then I give the kids the weekly test and have the post conferences – sometimes it feels like I’m just spinning my wheels.”

“Yeah,” replied Carol. “With any luck with your successes this year, next year you’ll be moved to some grade level you know nothing about. That is if you do a good job where you are this year. Talk about hostile! Look what happened to me, five years in first grade as grade chair having success mentoring my team, and I get plopped in fifth grade because I am effective. Unfortunately, I have none of the fifth-grade testing experience, don’t know the pacing guide, and am totally unfamiliar with teaching science to the entire fifth grade. I like science, but this is a bit much!”

“Now, now girls!” Sue chided Carol with a laugh “Erickson also says the child creates a feeling of worth to dispel feelings of inferiority or inadequacy that result from

competing in a world where adults appear confident and competent. Carol, seriously, you don't feel confident and competent?"

Carol laughed and said, "Do you know where I can get a few doses of that confidence and competency before the test so my kids can do well? Even with the SINI team coming in, I just don't think it's going to happen. Maybe if I quote Erickson and click my heels three times it will happen!"

"You know what makes me feel competent and confident," Lila said, "teaching what the kids are interested in and grabbing them and getting them involved in projects and research that requires those writing, reading, science and math skills—integrating the old curriculum. Letting them having some control and just watching them soar! The good old days of being able to teach what you know your kids need and be developmentally appropriate. Whenever something interesting comes along, I really have to stretch and try to fit it in with the pacing guide. I just have to fit it in, but unfortunately not many others on my team are willing to do it! Just teach the guide and all will be right with the world."

"Well," said Carol, "I just hope nobody faints or throws up before the test!"

EESAC MEETING – January, 2:15 p.m. Garden School Media Center

Garden School, like all the SINI schools in the district had to have an EESAC (Educational Excellence School Advisory Committee) meeting to go over the SINI (School in Need of Improvement) Plan Mid-Year Review and the SIP (School Improvement Plan) Mid-Year Review. The mid-year reviews were completed by the EESAC chairperson (a teacher) and other elected teachers on the committee. The committee's role was to make final recommendations about both plans before they were submitted. Parent signatures were required on the review submission. Although five parents were on the EESAC roster, only one attended the meeting.

After Ms. Black, the EESAC chairperson, reviewed the plans with the committee, she called for questions and comments.

Ms. Rose, the only parent present and the president of the PTA, commented, "This all sounds pretty good on paper, but I'm really concerned all this test prep and tutoring business is far too stressful, affecting the students in a very bad way. My son, Titus, who is in fifth grade, just hates coming to school. It's a battle! I feel like I'm losing him! He used to wake me up to be sure we wouldn't be late. Now all he does is complain when I try to get him up in the morning and to do his homework at night. Other parents are saying their kids are having trouble sleeping at night because of all the stress. A parent told me today she had to take her third grader to the doctor because of stomach complaints."

"Kids will be kids! We do have to get them ready for the FCAT. We're a SINI III school you know. We have to make those annual gains," explained Ms. Grace, the principal. "I've got two boys of my own and I know what they're like. We have to do all that we need to do."

Ms. Rose went on to say, "Well, Titus gets pulled out for writing tutoring and the FCAT conferencing and the other kids tease him. Now don't get me wrong. It's important that he has this opportunity, but wouldn't the whole class benefit from a writing tutor teaching class once a week during writing period with the teacher following up? Sometimes being pulled out means he misses part of P.E. or art or music. You know how

those kids feel about missing their art when they only get it an hour a week! P.E. is a mandate from the superintendent, isn't it?"

"Sure I do, but you know we're on a tight schedule to get that language block in every day. Things will loosen up a bit after testing. We'll be pulling out the third graders for writing to prepare them for next year. Things will return to normal if there is a normal anymore," answered Ms. Grace.

Ms. Rose chuckled, "That won't be soon enough. Another thing, after school, he goes to tutoring, singled out again. He says it's boring, the stuff that he has to read doesn't interest him. 'Too girly,' Titus says. And his friends bug him about going. What about getting some interesting boy stuff for the after school program, something the boys are interested in—hands-on type stuff where they can read and do?"

Ms. Grace smiled and was grateful that at least one parent was speaking her mind. Did other parents feel the same? Was there really two-way communication at the parent meetings or are the parents seething in silence? She asked herself, what can she do for the remainder of the year and next year to make the parents feel comfortable in voicing their concerns?

After the EESAC Meeting – January 3:20 p.m. in the Hallway

Ms. Grace and Ms. Rose were walking down the hallway. Ms. Rose said to Ms. Grace, "I'm sorry, I guess I kind of got on a roll there. I didn't mean to criticize but I just had to speak up. I talk with some of the parents when they drop off their kids in the morning. I know I'm not the only parent who thinks this stuff. You know we grew up and came out okay without all this testing stuff and being pulled out by tutors, conferences, and homework that goes on for hours just so they'll be ready for the test. I want my kids to learn and enjoy school and learning and be somebody some day. I don't want them to have all this stress."

Ms. Grace answered, "Yes, I want the same thing for them, too."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can students learn without test anxiety?
2. In what ways have teachers' attitudes about high-stake testing affected students?
3. Does emphasis on teaching according to the district's pacing guide limit access to creative, enriched learning experiences that encourage high-level thinking and discussion opportunities?
4. How can two-way communication with parents be developed at a school site so parents feel comfortable voicing their concerns?
5. How can a school help parents, who are committed to participating in the school improvement planning process, learn how to constructively participate in the process?
6. How effective are pullout programs (conferencing, tutoring, etc)?
7. Does success for a teacher at one grade level guarantee success on another? Should administrators have the authority to move teachers grade to grade?

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