

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

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Cautious Hope

Ah! The first day of school!, thought Principal Charlie Cando, standing outside his office, straightening his new tie. The fresh bulletin boards with exciting goals. The bustle of kids, lockers, new shoes, questionable smells from the cafeteria and the air of fresh paint—yep, it feels like a new year, he thought.

A bell rang. Lockers slammed. The hallways fell quiet. Around the corner, he spotted Esperanza, a student who had been in his school for three years. Rummaging through her ground-level locker, she was wearing a thick, black-hooded sweatshirt, hood covering her head. It was already 86° outside at 8:30 a.m., and the hallways weren't air conditioned. "Hello Esperanza!" he said as cheerfully as he could. He knew that Esperanza had a tough home situation and that she was struggling hard to stay in school.

"Sup, Mister," she muttered.

"Hey, Esperanza," Mr. Cando asked, "do you have a first period this semester?"

"No."

"Oh! Well then would you come with me to my office, then, just for a chat?" God, thought Esperanza. She trudged after him.

"So how was your summer?"

"Fine."

"How is your brother?"

"Fine."

"Did you go anywhere this summer, or. . . do anything interesting?"

"No."

"Are you still with your mom?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

"Why?"

"Just wondering."

"We moved to my Grandma's and then we left. Mr. Cando, do I have to stay here? It's the first day and I don't want to spend it in the principal's office."

"Nope, you definitely don't, go ahead. Hey, try to smile!"

As Esperanza bolted out the door, she brushed past Ms. Jaqueline Russo, a veteran English teacher and the department chair.

"That was Esperanza," said Mr. Cando defeated.

"So I see," said Ms. Russo. "What were you two talking about?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Mr. Cando sadly. "It's now clear to me she believes I'm some kind of a jerk."

"I spoke to her over the summer," offered Ms. Russo.

"Really?" asked Mr. Cando. "About what?"

"She failed all her summer school classes again, and she just checked herself into a group home."

Mr. Cando sat with this information for a moment. "She's lucky she has you to talk to," he said. And we're lucky so many of our teachers are so willing to build personal relationships with our kids, he thought to himself.

"I guess," said Ms. Russo. "I don't know how she gets up and makes it here everyday, to be honest. She's a brave kid."

"But Esperanza was doing so much better. . . she finally passed the state English Language Arts exam in June, and that poem she wrote for the literary magazine. . ." Mr. Cando's voice trailed off.

"She likes English, Mr. Cando," said Mr. Frank Smalls, a 12-year math teacher, as he walked briskly into the room. "But how do you push yourself to do algebra when you are scared of math and your mother is in jail?"

In walked Ms. Middleroad, the assistant principal for guidance. "So, we're here for the meeting of the minds," she announced.

"Good," said Cando. "We'll just wait for everyone else. Have some coffee."

"No thanks," Ms. Russo and Mr. Smalls said in unison.

"That is seriously nasty coffee, Mr. Cando," said Ms. Russo. "I don't know how you drink it." She smirked and took a sip of her green tea, brewed at home.

"Oh, stop," scoffed Cando. "You should talk. What have you got there? Weeds in a cup? That stuff is for hippies and Californians."

"I am both," said Russo with mock indignity.

"Exactly," said Mr. Cando. "Assimilate, for crying out loud. You're a New Yorker now. Have some bacon."

"He's kind of right," said Mr. Smalls to Ms. Russo. "We don't really drink alfalfa for breakfast here, hon."

"I am so oppressed," sighed Ms. Russo, wearily punching Mr. Smalls in the arm.

"Here they all come," said Ms. Middleroad. "Let the meeting of the minds begin."

Background

Manhattan High School is a public high school in New York City's "alternative" school district, a specialized district that was established to support schools that serve students with special needs. These schools range from students who have recently immigrated and are learning English for the first time, to specialized schools with progressive academic structures, to schools for incarcerated and pregnant teenagers. Manhattan High School has an enrollment of approximately 600 students. Approximately 50% are transfer students: students who had to leave other schools, "second-chance" students. The other 50% are students who have just emigrated from China. All of the students at MHS are between the ages of 17-21. For many of the students, this is a last chance to graduate. If they do not succeed, they will not graduate from any public day high school program in the city.

A rising percentage of the transfer students at Manhattan High bring with them long histories of dismal attendance and repeated failures of the same classes. Despite vigilant, caring teaching and a sensitive administration, many students linger in the hallways often, fights break out, and sleeping during class is all too frequent. Others relentlessly try to cut classes, and rarely, if ever, consistently follow assignments through to completion. Most of these students face some sort of trouble at home or in their personal lives that operates against their success in school.

Like many schools, Manhattan High has had its budget cut dramatically during the past year, forcing it to lose a teacher, a guidance counselor, and its only social worker. Charlie Cando and his staff have been trying to reach a growing number of students who chronically fail their classes under often frustrating circumstances.

The Dilemma Discussed

"All right ladies and gentlemen," began Mr. Cando in his typical jocular tone. "Welcome to our first Principal's Cabinet meeting of the year. To get our conversation going, I have here in my hand our student statistics from last year. They are both hopeful and dismal. Welcome back!"

"Hopeful first," said Ms. Elizabeth Famiglia, the school's parent coordinator.

"Alrighty, Liz," said Mr. Cando. "You've got it. It seems that 35 of our 50 graduating transfer seniors last spring have enrolled in college this fall. Happy data indeed."

Several people clapped. In a school like MHS, graduating was truly a feat to be commended. College enrollment, particularly for the transfer students, was often the wistful fantasy of a lonely few, and when accomplished, was a milestone to be soulfully celebrated.

"Ok, dismal now," said Mr. Frank Smalls, a science teacher.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Cando. "Dismal. Well, 98% of all of our transfer students are on no track whatsoever leading to any kind of graduation; in other words, almost all of our transfer students failed at least one class last semester."

"What else?" asked Ms. Russo.

Mr. Cando cleared his throat and smoothed back his recently graying black hair. "80% of them failed two classes, and 72% of them failed three or more classes. 47% of our transfer students passed only one class, or no classes whatsoever."

Ms. Middleroad winced. Even though she'd already seen them, they were hard statistics to hear.

"Obviously," began Mr. Cando, "we have a problem. Our transfer students, who come to our school with all sorts of troubles—potentially undiagnosed learning disabilities, disabling attendance records, and an academic lifetime of failing grades—continue their patterns at our school. And yet, it is our job to get them through. We have a tighter budget than ever, and yet, it is inherently part of our mission to reach these kids. My question to you at the end of last year, and the one I put to you now, is how do we propose to graduate our chronically failing transfer kids? This is our dilemma."

"Advisory," said Ms. Russo, leaping at the invitation. "That is what we need. Small groups of students working with a teacher around emotional, social, academic, and team building skills. It's a regular part of every day—part of their regular schedule."

"Reduce class size," piped in Mr. Smalls. "I don't think advisory structures are bad, I just don't think they can solve the academic achievement problem. These kids are failing the same classes over and over again. Smaller class sizes will mean that instead of 34 frustrated students in the same room, we will have 15 or 20, which will offer us more one-on-one time. That's what these kids really need. Real help."

"But how can we even talk about either idea without having any kind of sustained contact with their families?" asked Ms. Famiglia. "If the students have no support at home, and their parents have no meaningful connection with the school, how can they succeed under any circumstances?"

"Increased time for Special Education, pulling students out of class, and truly working with them one-on-one is even better than one-on-fifteen," said Mr. Peters, the school's only licensed Special Education teacher. "Or even pushing into their classes and working with them there," he added.

There was silence. Mr. Cando gulped his coffee. Yuck, he thought. This is nasty. Russo is right.

"So many of our parents have given up on their kids," said Ms. Russo, "or their parents

were never really involved to begin with. Are you saying that unless their parents are with them, kids can't ever graduate? That there is no hope? Some of our students are 20 years old and live on their own. What about them? Many of our students were born to parents with no education themselves. How can they help our kids with math homework? Are these kids just destined to fail, and that's it for them?"

"Yeah, it does take a lot to meaningfully organize parents," said Mr. Smalls. "Ms. Famiglia, your proposal mentions adult literacy classes for the parents, meetings, outings, fairs, newsletters translated into multiple languages, daily calls home, and home visits in extreme cases. Can you really do all that yourself?"

"No, I can't, Frank," responded Ms. Famiglia, "but to try none of them means to give up on the parents at our school completely. I think that would be a grave mistake. The truth is that most of our kids still live at home. Their parents are tired of fighting with them, and weak efforts from schools to make contact don't offer any place for them to get more information. Should we give up on them?"

"No," said Mr. Smalls. "No, we shouldn't."

"I hear what you're saying Ms. Famiglia," said Ms. Russo. "But it seems to me that by age 18 or 19, focusing major resources on their parents asks us to deny the reality our kids face. We can't rebuild relationships at home—our students are adults. That's not our job or our business. But we can help our kids find emotional, academic support here in the building, and we can teach them how to take advantage of it and succeed on their own through something like advisory. You know as well as I do that even though most of our kids 'live at home,' they do so with absentee or working aunts, uncles, grandparents, who just don't have time or energy to deal with a failing kid. Some of our kids come from abusive situations. . . parents in jail. . . don't we need first to empower the students before we go to work on their parents?"

"Not all teachers are willing to lead an advisory," reminded Ms. Middleroad. "Doesn't everyone need to be on board for it to work? Not all teachers feel comfortable working with students on that level."

"Not to mention how difficult it will be," chimed in Mr. Cando, "to get our kids to take an extra class, when they scarcely attend the ones they need for graduation."

Mr. Smalls frowned. "I still don't understand why we're talking about new programs when we still have classroom size at or even above the legal maximum."

"Because we don't have enough classrooms, Frank," said Mr. Cando bluntly. "We can't cut our class sizes unless we expand our building or cut our enrollment. And since we are in Lower Manhattan, the building won't expand by even one brick, and if we reduce our enrollment, we lose funding."

"We could rotate the schedule," said Mr. Smalls. "Alternating start and end times—two groups of students, one starting earlier than the other, one ending later."

"But what will that do to our school community?" asked Ms. Famiglia.

"What choice do we have?" asked Mr. Smalls. "We can sit around singing Kum Bah Yah with these kids and teaching them to hug each other with marginal results, or we can actually tutor them through Algebra so they can get out of here to get on with their lives. Doesn't that seem most efficient?"

"Do you know for sure that would work?" asked Ms. Famiglia.

"What if we had smaller classes and advisory?" Said Ms. Russo.

"Are you trying to kill me or something?" Mr. Cando said. Where are you getting the money for the four additional teachers for the alternating start schedule, which Frank's

proposal calls for? May I remind you that I had to let one teacher go this year because of budget cuts?"

"Well, then maybe we need to do a little more restructuring, Charlie," Mr. Smalls said. "You know, as far back as the late 70s there have been studies showing the benefits of smaller classes. Gene Glass and Mary Lee Smith published a collection of studies that shows that small classes were associated with higher achievement at all grade levels. They also found that small classes improved students' behavior, teacher morale, and the overall academic environment of the school.

"Is anyone here saying that small classes are bad?" asked Mr. Cando. "I don't think anyone is saying that. I'm saying, and I can only speak for myself, that we just don't have the money or the resources to do it!"

"Then what about letting Special Education push in to classes?" asked Mr. Peters. "Why not hire one more Special Ed teacher, and let us come in? That only means one extra teacher and no more space."

"How can we hire one more teacher when we had to let one go? Also, only six of our transfer students actually qualify for Special Education services. And it's nearly impossible to get a learning disabled diagnosis at this stage of a student's education. That is a difficult reality for us."

"God, this is endless," sighed Ms. Russo. "And yet, as we're sitting here, we still have the same failing statistics in our laps."

"Why can't we just do what we need to do?" asked Ms. Famiglia.

"We need all of these things," said Ms. Middleroad.

"That's true," said Mr. Cando. "But we can't afford them all. Where do we channel the money and efforts we have?"

"Advisory," said Ms. Russo.

"Smaller class sizes," said Mr. Smalls.

"Parent Outreach," said Ms. Famiglia.

Discussion Questions

1. How can schools and communities provide for emotional support for students to achieve academic success?
2. How can we best reach chronically failing students in high school?
3. What is the school's role in working with families?
4. What is the school's fiscal responsibility to address the needs of these students?
5. Which proposal might be most successful in reaching chronically failing students?

References

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