

Getting All Families Involved¹

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3rd Grade Hallway, 3:15 p.m.

“I just spoke to Gregory’s mom about his reading habits. I feel like I call once a week to remind her that he needs to read 30 minutes each night. He went down two reading levels over the summer because he was at Grandma’s in Ecuador and barely read.”

Ms. Wright rubbed her tired eyes in frustration. She felt enormous pressure to raise test scores, but knew she had no control over her students’ home lives. Ms. Wright—Mae Wright—was the kind of person who challenged herself and her students to become more caring, intelligent people. In her high school years, she was the student body president who started a community service program in her school. She always had a positive outlook, which helped her become a popular and likable person.

Her third grade colleague, Ms. Stone, threw her hands up in disgust. “I know, it’s like reading and education are not important to some parents.” Ms. Stone was a more abrasive teacher who put in her time as a teacher, but rarely worked more than her contractual hours.

Ms. Wright agreed. “I would love to be a fly on the wall in their home to see what goes on in there. How do Gregory’s parents help him be a better student?”

Ms. Stone already had her bags in hand and started walking down the hallway toward the exit. “You are doing everything you can...go home.”

Ms. Wright turned to walk back into her classroom. I don’t know, am I? She asked herself. Maybe I’ll talk about it with Alison on our run tonight,” Mae thought.

Ms. Wright taught the third grade Collaborative Team Teaching² (CTT) class at The Bridge School with Alison Rose. This was her fifth year teaching. She came to teaching through the New York City Teaching Fellows program. For her first three years, she taught at a SURR school (School Under Registration Review)³ where all of her students received free lunch and many were English Language Learners (ELL). The school had low parent involvement and often parents didn’t come to parent-teacher conferences.

This was her second year at the Bridge School, which was markedly different from her former school. Here she took advantage of the professional development and leadership opportunities the principal provided. Ms. Wright, unlike many new teachers, planned to make a career out of education.

Alison Rose was the special education teacher in Ms. Wright’s classroom. Ms. Rose shared the same concerns as Mae Wright had about Gregory and other students in their class. Mae and Alison also shared similar views about the discrepancy in test scores

¹ This case is inspired by the following action research papers: *Beyond the Test*, by Elizabeth Gil, TNLI MetLife Fellow New York City and *Opportunities for Learning and Interactions that Promote Literate Actions and Practices*, by Sandra Bravo, TNLI MetLife Fellow Santa Barbara County.

² A CTT class is an inclusion class with 40% students with IEPs (Individual Education Plan) and 60% general education students. There are two teachers, one with a special education license and one with a general education license.

³ SURR schools are low performing public schools that are targeted for corrective action. They run the risk of being closed if significant improvements are not made.

between socio-economically disadvantaged students and those who were socio-economically advantaged. Since they live in the same neighborhood, they often ran together and talked about their students. Mae was glad she had someone that felt the same way as she did about school.

The Bridge School

The Bridge School was a medium-sized elementary school with a total population of 491 students. It was located in a middle-to-upper class section of the city among brownstones and popular restaurants. In 2001, this school had been on the list of failing city schools and was comprised of poor children from a nearby housing project and building superintendent's children who lived in the neighborhood.

Things changed in 2003 when a new principal, Margo Chase, arrived at the school with a new vision. Soon the local, wealthy parents began sending their children there. There were several reasons why this change happened. First, Margo Chase and her staff developer side-kick moved from a better and more popular school where test scores were solid. Together, they improved the curriculum and provided professional development for teachers. Another reason the local parents turned to the Bridge School was that after September 11th parents felt safer walking their children to school rather than sending them on the subway.

The student body was 43.6 % White, 37.5% Black, 10.6% Hispanic, 6.3% Asian, and 0.62% American Indian. 12% of the students had an IEP in a Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) setting and 10% of the population was ELL. The teaching staff was mostly white.

Four years after Principal Chase's arrival, the fourth and fifth grade classes had a higher ELL population, more IEPs, and were predominantly Black and Hispanic with low socio-economic status. The pre-K to third grade students were mostly White and Asian with middle to upper socio-economic status. Just one walk around the building and the differences between the upper and lower grades were obvious.

The school staff was committed to transforming the Bridge School. The test scores that were once on a steady decline began to increase. It became a competition among parents to get their children into pre-kindergarten. These new parents were excited and involved. They liked the comfortable, supportive, and open-door atmosphere that Margo Chase provided, including a parent room. A strong PTA whose constant support and drive provided teachers with an extra \$250 per year to fund items for their classrooms. All grades received at least one extra activity from an outside partnership such as an art internship with one of the city's major museums. Other partnerships included: a chess club, a dance studio, and an environmental organization. All grade levels held enrichment groups once a week where a staff member or parent taught group activities such as knitting, track, or puppetry based on students' interest.

The Bridge School, once on the city's failing list, now had made a major turn around with help from the principal, the PTA, young vibrant teachers, and a dramatic change in population.

Principal's Office, 5:31 p.m.

On her way home, Ms. Wright stopped into the principal's office to talk to Ms. Chase. Ms. Chase often had good suggestions when Ms. Wright had questions about teaching reading or writing. She thought about Gregory and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Ms. Chase smiled. Many teachers found Ms. Chase to be stern and rigid, yet compassionate in the ways she ran the school. She expected academic rigor in all classrooms and did not accept excuses, which made the school a success. Ms. Chase saw potential in Mae and relied on her to lead her grade. Mae, in return, relied on Ms. Chase for advice and direction.

"Hi, I have a question about a student. I know you give great advice when I ask how to teach a particular reading skill so I thought I would ask you about Gregory."

"Oh, Gregory...sure," Ms. Chase replied knowingly.

"Well," Ms. Wright began, "He is a year behind in reading, and he often comes in without his homework completed. His mom says that he reads in his room with the door closed because his younger brother bothers him. I'm sure he doesn't read for the whole 30 minutes or else he would be reading more books each night. I keep him in for recess, but that isn't helping. He still doesn't come in prepared."

Ms. Chase's eyes cut through Ms. Wright, "It seems as though some of these parents just don't care. You can keep calling, keep him in for recess... did you mark him 'promotion in doubt'?" she asked, wondering if the school was covering itself. "Oh, speaking of that, the other little boy in your class, the one who doesn't do his homework because he goes to karate class instead, did you mark him 'promotion in doubt'?"

As much as she respected and valued Ms. Chase, Ms. Wright felt hopeless. "Yes, I marked them 'promotion in doubt,'" she sighed. "I just...I just feel like we, as a school, aren't doing enough to give some kids everything they need and deserve," she said.

Ms. Chase looked surprised and maybe even a little offended. She looked over her glasses at Ms. Wright. "And what exactly do you mean?"

Ms. Wright took a deep breath. She certainly didn't want to step on Ms. Chase's toes, but felt strongly that she could do more. This is my chance, she thought.

"In our CTT class we have a mix of students. There are children from middle-to-upper class families and children from lower-class families who are the ones with IEPs and are ELL. We have several functions in our class during the year such as Parents as Math Partners, writing celebrations, Curriculum Day, and field trips. It is the same parents who attend every time, the ones who can afford to miss work. More than that, it is these children who are on or above grade level in the class and who get extra help at home. A couple of parents didn't even show up for the last conferences...they said it's because they had too much going on at home or they were sick, but then they didn't try to reschedule."

Ms. Chase replied, "Part of that is a system-wide problem. Research shows that socio-economic status and children's readiness for school are related. Families that do not have many resources must put their priority on housing, food, and other necessities. Children are coming to school underprepared—that's just how it is." Ms. Chase seemed to be excusing herself, Mae thought.

"Exactly," Ms. Wright replied. "And what are we doing about it? I look across our fourth and fifth grade students and see the same problems. There are more children below grade level who come from lower-class families and have less parent involvement

as a whole. So, my question is, what is our responsibility as a school to help these kids even more? To get their parents involved? To teach parents how to help with homework at home? To get them to care about their children's education? Our school must take more responsibility to move all our students forward, not just the ones who come in prepared for school."

Ms. Wright felt relieved. She hadn't realized how much she hated the contradiction of family involvement and student achievement in the school. She knew the achievement gap at The Bridge School could start closing if she convinced Ms. Chase that they could do more for their marginalized families.

Ms. Chase took off her glasses and sat back. "You have a good point, Ms. Wright. I'll speak to the parent coordinator. Maybe she could use your help. Perhaps you can bring this issue up at the School Leadership Team (SLT). I consider you to be one of our school leaders and would be delighted for you to see this through."

She knew Ms. Chase well enough to know that if she researched this area with the parent coordinator and created some next steps, then Ms. Chase would keep her promise. That was how they got the chess program in the school. She picked up her coat and bag and said, "Thanks, Ms. Chase. Have a good night."

Ms. Wright stepped into the night's air and felt empowered to make a difference. The real work is about to begin, she thought.

Walking Home, 6:17p.m.

On her walk home, Ms. Wright thought about her good friend, Lisa. They started in the New York City Teaching Fellows program together, and Lisa was still teaching in her original school in an immigrant neighborhood in the city. She had done some research on getting immigrant families more involved in the school and then formed a writing group for mothers, hoping to make a better home-school connection. Lisa figured that since moms are the main contact in the family, she could use this writing group to get moms to be more capable of helping their children with homework, which in turn would help them do better in school. She was able to see progress in her students.⁴

Then she thought about her friend Lori, in California, who worked in an immigrant town in Santa Barbara County. She had started a family literacy program in her school to teach parents how to read with their children. First, they read the book and then are taught important questions to ask. Then their children came in, and the parent and child read together. Parents learned when to stop to ask important questions about the book. Lori said that her school realized they were not providing opportunities to get families involved in their child's education. All the teachers felt frustrated that parents weren't helping their kids in the way the school expected. Then someone pointed out that these values were middle-class values and didn't take into account minority families. Recently, Lori told Mae that this program was so successful because she taught in a way that built on parents' cultural values and language and then made the leap to connect parents with the school culture. She realized this learning opportunity empowered parents which in turn led them to further help their child with school work at home.⁵

⁴ Gil, Elizabeth. *Beyond the Test*, Teachers Network Leadership Institute. MetLife Foundation, NYC, NY.

⁵ Sandra Bravo, *Opportunities for Learning and Interactions that Promote Literate Actions and Practices*. Teachers Network Leadership Group, Santa Barbara, CA.

While The Bridge School was not made up of immigrant families, Mae believed the same problem of a home-school gap with families of low socio-economic status existed. For the most part, these families included the ELL children, children with IEPs, and most of the children in fourth and fifth grade.

On a run with Alison Rose, 6:44 p.m.

When Ms. Wright got home she called Alison Rose and put on her running clothes. They had a routine of meeting on the nearby corner. As soon as the pair met, Mae told Alison about her conversation with Ms. Chase.

“Now we have Ms. Chase’s support to do something about our students and families. What can we do to make the home-school connection better? I barely see Gregory’s mom, Pedro’s mom, Mary’s mom. They come for parent conferences, but that’s it. I’ve heard it’s even worse in the fourth and fifth grades.”

“Yes, in fact Juan’s mom was too busy with the baby to make the last conference. I rarely see any parents of the low-income kids. That isn’t fair. Does Ms. Chase think that because most of our kids are well off and that we have AIS (Academic Intervention Services) for those who are not, that we are doing everything we can for these children?” Alison questioned.

“I talked to Ms. Chase and will bring this up to the SLT team next week. Maybe some parents will have ideas about how to get all parents involved.”

“Are you kidding?” Alison asked. “All those parents on the SLT team are from the neighborhood. They are the same parents who attend the silent auction and PTA meetings. They are the ones with money whose children are already doing well in school.”

“That is true,” Mae agreed, “but they care and want to help, right?”

“Look, I was reading a neighborhood blog about our school. There was a discussion about test scores. Someone had the nerve to say that the scores will increase even more in two years once the fourth and fifth grade kids are out. Mae, our school is made up of more people like that than you know, and it’s going to be hard to get parents’ support,” Alison said.

As much as she didn’t want to believe Alison, Mae knew she could be right. Mae wasn’t sure what to feel. Then she thought about Ms. Ramirez, the ELL teacher from her former school. I’ll call Ms. Ramirez when I get home, she thought.

Phone call to Ms. Ramirez, 7:15 p.m.

Ms. Ramirez was the ELL teacher who worked at Ms. Wright’s former school. Ms. Ramirez was Mae’s unofficial mentor. She helped Mae “learn the ropes” as a new teacher and would go to Ms. Ramirez when she had a problem with a child, parent, or administration. Mae always thought of Ms. Ramirez as the “voice of reason,” which is why she still called her for support.

Ms. Ramirez had been teaching for 17 years and had grown up in a poor neighborhood in the city. She spoke Spanish to the parents and held breakfast pot-lucks in order to see the parents with their children. All the parents loved her. She held workshops to teach parents reading and writing skills. She had them volunteer in their child’s class. She sent home interactive homework. She called home when they were not

able to make a meeting and filled them in on what happened. She always said it was up to the school to offer programs to accommodate parents' knowledge of English and to reach out to them.

"Hi Yolanda. It's Mae Wright. How are you?"

"Hello Mae, I'm doing well. I'm cooking some rice and beans for the breakfast pot-luck in the morning," she answered.

"Hmm, I love your rice and beans. I can almost smell them through the phone. I won't keep you long, but I have a question that you might be able to help me with," Mae stated.

"Ok, I'd love to help," she responded.

"You do so many wonderful things with your parents. I'm finding that the low-income parents in my new school are just not involved, and it seems like they don't care about their children's education. I would love some advice on what I can do," Ms. Wright pleaded.

Ms. Ramirez responded, "Well, first of all, all parents care about their children's education. Everyone just shows it in different ways. Remember the day when Jose didn't do his homework because he had to get pajamas for pajama day? Well, his mom did the right thing for him to fit in for pajama day. Remember that time when Gerald was out of school before the ELA test because he was visiting his dying grandmother? Well, to his mom, family comes first. In this school of many immigrant families, parents provide more support than just sitting down with the child to help with homework. Parents let their children out of chores if they have a big project. They allow their children to seek mentors in the community.⁶ I ask parents where they see their children now and how they see me helping them throughout the school year. Parents want to be involved, but many lack a formal education, and often times can't help in ways we want them to. But it's important to remember that every parent wants to see their child succeed. Success is just different depending on whom you are talking to. Does that help?" Ms. Ramirez asked.

Ms. Wright's smile broadened. She realized it was wrong to think parents didn't care about their children's education. "Thanks, you have been so helpful as usual. I'll make it up to you by taking you out for dinner at our favorite spot."

"Would love to. One last question, is your school welcoming to these parents, or just the parents with money?" Ms. Ramirez asked.

Mae thought about what Alison said about the neighborhood blog and what Ms. Chase said that about the students of low income coming in under-prepared for school and Juan's mom who didn't show up for parent conferences. She also thought about the faces she saw at school events and how it is mostly the parents with money who felt welcomed in the school. "Hmm, good question," Mae responded.

School Leadership Team Meeting –the following week, 4:00 p.m.

Ms. Wright walked into the parent room at The Bridge School. The night before she had e-mailed the facilitator and put herself on the SLT agenda. She sat down among the parents and teachers and looked around. These white faces didn't represent all the children at the school. This may be tough, Ms. Wright thought. Mae respected these parents for making the school a better place. They donated money, volunteered time, and

⁶ Caspe, Lopez, Wolos. (2007) *Family Involvement in Elementary School Children's Education* Harvard Family Research Center.

were generally were very helpful to the school. After they covered the usually topics, it was Mae's turn.

"I would like to talk about the full representation of our Bridge School Community," Mae began. "I'm concerned about half of our population and how those parents are perceived here. I would also like us to help all become a part of our parent community. I would love for all parents to feel just as welcomed as you all do. I think as a school we could come together to make this happen. We have more resources than many schools and are fortunate enough to be able to do something about this problem."

The room fell silent. Karen Sands, a second grade parent, spoke. "Our door is always open, so I'm not sure why some parents wouldn't feel welcomed in our school." Everyone looked at Mae and agreed that all parents should feel comfortable in the school.

Then the PTA president spoke, "You know, when I became president, it was my goal to see that more parents became involved at The Bridge School. Mae, do you have any ideas?" she asked.

Mae felt all eyes turn to her. She took a deep breath. She was determined to get all families involved, but she was confused about where to begin, "What should I do next?" she wondered.

Discussion Questions:

1. What should Mae do next? Can she accrue the power to mobilize parents, teachers, the administration? Who are her allies?
2. What is a school's responsibility to get all families involved?
3. What is the percentage of minority students needed for a school to initiate a family literacy program?
4. What is a school's responsibility to close the achievement gap between low-income students and high-income students?
5. How do schools get teachers, parents, and administrators to become more sensitive and accommodating to all cultural and economic backgrounds?

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