

School Reform and Teacher Collaboration

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“Can you believe it!” blurted Stephanie as she entered the Teacher Center. “Rita, go look in your mail box. P.S. 911 is still failing under the federal No Child Left Behind law based on how our kids did in 2005-06. Gawd! We have all worked so hard, the kids, too.”

“I have my letter,” replied Rita with a tone of dejection.

“Did you look at the attached memo? Another round of professional development in Guided Reading methods. Yippee!”

“Oh great. One more consultant coming to teach us how to teach in a new and better way. Wouldn’t it be better if teachers were asked their thoughts about what we need to improve. You know what bothers me, Stephanie, is that our school has a high percentage of English Language Learners (ELL), and I don’t have a clue how to teach them. I need some expertise, better strategies to teach them how to read. I think that our ELL are the elephants in the room that no one wants to see.”

“I just read an enlightening article about NCLB,” Stephanie added. One of the authors of the law admitted that the ELL problem was not addressed in the law, so these students’ results were put together with native English speakers. Something has to be done. I don’t think I help my students enough. What should we do? All the literature says that we have to scaffold lessons. I don’t know exactly what that means.”

As Stephanie and Rita were talking, Connie came into the Teacher Center to do work on the computer. Rita and Stephanie both told Connie to check her mailbox.

Upon learning the news about the professional development (PD), Connie responded, “I think it’s great. I am glad that there’s going to be further professional development about Guided Reading. I want someone to tell me exactly what to do. I like the Guided Reading program, but I always wonder if I am doing it the right way. I know there are several teachers in this school that would like to learn more. I hear them talking at lunch and during our common planning periods. They feel quite insecure about teaching reading.”

P.S. 911

P.S. 911 was a K–5 school located in the Central Bronx section of New York City. The enrollment at the school was approximately 1,000 students and included 81.3% Hispanic, 17.4% African American, .4% white, and .9% classified as other students. Of the 81.3% Hispanic students, 37% were identified as English Language Learners as measured by the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test, commonly known as the NYSESLAT. Of particular note, the number of newly arrived immigrants (within three years) enrolled at P.S. 911 had been increasing since 2003 and was now 8.4% of the school population. In the 2001-02 school year, P.S. 911 was added to the Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) list of New York City’s under-achieving schools. The SURR list was comprised of schools throughout the city that were perceived to be failing because of little or no improvement in test scores. These schools were grouped together into an educational region for the purpose of receiving additional supervision and funding. This designation preceded the No Child Left Behind list of failing

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schools. The extra monies were given to the school for smaller class sizes, and only New York State-certified teachers could be on staff. Those teachers who were not qualified, transferred to other schools, and their certified replacements were hired centrally by the education department.

There were 80 teachers on the school staff. The school's ELA and math curriculum were prescribed by the SURR office. Teachers had little say in what or how to teach. Professional development for teachers was required on a weekly basis. The content of these sessions was determined by the curriculum. Sessions were held on how to use the reading program and ways to implement the new textbook in math. Other sessions were about recording the correct data onto special forms. Teachers had no input. In the 2006-07 school year, 75% of the classroom teachers had five or more years of teaching experience and 80% held a master's degree or higher. Of this number, 35% were new to P.S. 911. Beginning teachers were primarily recruited from the New York City Teaching Fellows Program. Since 2001, the turn-over of staff each year was in the 10% range.

The Teachers

Stephanie Englert had taught at P.S. 911 for 10 years. During this time, she had different assignments, but for the past eight years she was a first grade teacher.

The school evolved through several different approaches to teaching reading and now that Guided Reading was a key component of in the literacy curriculum, she was skeptical as to how long this would prevail. Generally, Stephanie displayed good will towards the many changes that occurred. Last week, however, when being observed during the reading lesson for the third day in succession, she felt overwhelmed. On her lunch break, she told her supervisor: "For 10 years, no one asked me what I was doing or how I was doing it. Now you want me to be an expert who will raise test scores in six months. And guess what, the way I see it, in five years no one will even mention Guided Reading."

Rita Rose had been a teacher for 22 years. Rita was the "fashion plate" of the school. Each day, she wore something colorful, unique, and always with matching accessories. Her outfits sparked many conversations.

"Rita, where did you get those shoes? That style is from the 60s."

"They are from my closet. I never throw anything away." Rita had previously taught pre-school and kindergarten, but not within the New York City system. Her past experiences were both in the public and private sector where schools were smaller and professional training was more informal. Rita had been at P.S. 911 for six years. During that time, she had taught kindergarten, first grade, and was presently teaching the third grade. Rita worked very hard and strived to comply with every directive and complete the myriad reports on students. She felt very uncertain in the third grade since the bulk of her experience was in kindergarten and first grade. She said, "I know how to teach reading to the little ones, and I think I know about the interests of third graders, but all these new terms and directives make me nervous. I need time to assimilate and make this information my own. And I don't want anyone breathing down my neck! First and second grade teachers have it made—their students do not take any standardized tests."

Connie Lee was full of energy and continually contributed a positive comment to conversations at P.S. 911. Connie had been teaching the second grade for four years. She always had some project going with her students—art, social studies, dance. Occasionally, she had conflicts with the administration. Her supervisor chided her because she was not teaching the appropriate subject according to the posted daily schedule. Connie was always able to explain that teaching and learning did not fit compactly into time slots. She was not afraid to speak her

mind. Connie lived in the city and took full advantage of all the cultural opportunities available. She wanted to be the “best” and was open to learn from anyone who would help her achieve this. Connie’s personal goal was to earn a Ph.D. in Education and teach at the college level.

Mary Greene, principal at P.S. 911, came to the school in September 2001. Prior to coming to P.S. 911, she was the principal of a small school that was being closed. Connie and Mary forged a special bond when Connie was hired. Connie spoke about her desire to start a multicultural dance and drama group after school, and Mary supported her proposal and gave her the classroom space and materials that she needed. Mary wanted teachers to work together and collaboratively plan lessons, and Connie supported that idea and organized her grade level to do it. Mary’s own heritage—Chinese, Jamaican, African American—enabled her to see many sides of a situation. Mary loved science and frequently suggested ideas to teachers as to how they could teach reading through science. It was her dream that the school would become a science magnet school, but she was restrained by the regional administration and told to focus on reading. Mary was frustrated by this, but accepted the reality.

John Jessie scheduled a visit to the school for the celebration of Dominican Republic Independence Day. Jessie was one of 10 local instructional superintendents in Region Y. He came to the New York area from Florida where he had been a successful elementary school principal. His background was in Special Education and during his time in Florida, he had been successful in turning around a failing school.

Rita and Stephanie’s classes were seated near each other in the auditorium for the Dominican program. Stephanie commented to Rita that no one from the region had ever attended a program at the school before.

Rita replied, “Let’s hope this is a good omen. Let’s hope that he is genuinely interested in everything that we do here, not just the academics.”

Mr. Jessie appeared friendly, but as he walked the school with the principal, he did not attempt to engage the teachers in conversation about their students or the progress they were making.

More Data

60% of the student population at P.S. 911 was reading below grade level and 51% of the students were scoring below grade level in mathematics. These percentages included English Language Learners. Compared to similar schools in the geographic area, P.S. 911 was not making adequate progress. The school was located within a pocket of housing that was welcoming to newly-arrived immigrants. Of the nearby area schools, P.S. 911 had the highest percentage of students newly arrived in the U.S. To understand the low scores in reading and math, it was important to study the NYSESLAT scores. This test was taken only by the students who were classified as ELL, a designation made by their parents at the time of registration.

Looking at the 2005 NYSESLAT scores:

Grades K – 1

Listening and Speaking, 71 students tested, 14 proficient

Reading and Writing, 71 students tested, 3 proficient

Grades 2 – 4

Listening and Speaking, 225 students tested, 28 proficient

Reading and Writing, 225 students tested, 28 proficient

Grade 5

Listening and Speaking, 72 students tested, 6 proficient

Reading and Writing, 72 students tested, 3 proficient

Because the NYSESLAT scores were considered low by the Department of Education, these students received classroom support from an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher each day. Depending on their NYSESLAT rating as beginner, intermediate, or advanced, they received 45 to 90 minutes per day of language support within the classroom.

Further Information

Stephanie and Rita saw each other later in the day as they picked up some new social studies books in the book room. Stephanie reflected on a class she took last semester about school change. “Rita, did you know that there has been so much written about how to improve schools and how everyone that is part of the school community must be involved?” She related that Roland S. Barth had written extensively about improving schools. Barth claims that the staff must become a community of learners and as they do this, they will become leaders.

Rita answered, “I am not familiar with his name. I think you do more reading than I do, Stephanie. Do you have any articles that you can share with me?”

“Yes, I do. In fact there was an informative article in a recent issue of *Educational Leadership* magazine. I’ll try and remember to bring it tomorrow. It discusses how the principal and/or regional superintendent has the opportunity to empower teachers by making them part of the decision-making process. Teachers must grow and develop their craft if their students are to grow.”

“Stephanie, do you think that Mary has read this article? Maybe you should copy it and let her read it, too. What about suggesting that every grade level use it as discussion in their planning meetings?”

“That sounds like a good suggestion, Rita. The last graduate course that I took included a study that Zemke and Zemke did in 1995 about adult learning and what motivates us oldies to keep on studying. It emphasized that instructional leaders must find out what people already know – and then what they want to know.”

Connie walked by with four students to carry the books for her class.

“Connie, would you be interested in reading an article about involving teachers and community members in improving schools?”

“Sure, Stephanie. What’s the purpose for this reading?”

“Stephanie, you and Rita and I really care about what is happening here. I think we have to build up some spirit among all the staff members before we talk about developing a plan.”

“You are absolutely right. Where teachers are able to exercise professional judgment, teachers become collaborative, and use data and support each other in discussions of educational issues and policies. In schools where there is no effort or desire to develop a learning community—where there are mandates and scripts—little growth occurs. Research has statistics to prove this. Just look at our teachers. If they thought that someone was listening, they would buy into things a whole lot better.” Rita was silently thinking: What about Al and Judy and Ina? All they ever say is tell me what to do, I will do it. They are great about complaining. Maybe they do need to be challenged with proposing a solution for what they whine about.

“Connie, you talk with them frequently at lunch. Would you be able to initiate some conversation about this? I know that they have opinions and thoughts about what is happening

here. Include David as well. You know, he is in graduate school, working on his administration certification. He must be aware of these trends. We have to build a teacher coalition, and also reach out to parents. Let's ask the parent coordinator to come to lunch one day. No one ever mentions the parents. After all, it is their children we are all trying to help."

The Urgency

P.S. 911 was in its third year of restructuring. At the end of this year, decisions would be made as to how the school would continue. There was no history of teachers being invited to the table to express concerns, problems, and offer ideas. The restructuring that was done was planned and decided at the central office. There was not an unusually high turnover rate of faculty at the school. In fact, 70% of the teachers were at the school for more than five years. Teachers were very aware of the lack of progress on standardized tests. Among themselves they talked about why students were not improving. They wondered how to better help the ELL students.

John Jessie had a mandate from the central office: turn P.S. 911 around and help it make adequate yearly progress. The programs and methods used to date have been required. No one tried to create a professional learning community among the adults, but the creation of learning communities was a process, it would take time and effort.

Stephanie's, Rita's, and Connie's conversation about learning strategies to better teach the ELL students reflected teacher awareness of needs that were not being met. Were there other needs? Were there other conversations among teachers? Was training in Guided Reading strategies the only way to improve reading scores?

Dilemmas

Stephanie and Rita did not want to attend another round of Guided Reading strategies, but Connie did. When they walked out of school that night, they once again discussed how boring and irrelevant these sessions were. Connie conceded that the format of the professional development was dull and uninteresting. They understood the reading process. Once again they told each other how they wished they knew more about ESL strategies. They talked about seeing what other teachers thought.

Stephanie interrupted the conversation. "That's it. I am going to bite the bullet. When I get home, I will e-mail Mr. Jessie and ask him to set up a meeting so that he can learn of teacher concerns along with possible solutions. Every teacher will be invited and welcomed to this meeting. I will copy the e-mail to the principal."

Connie and Rita simultaneously responded, "Way to go, girl!"

Mary Greene wanted to build a collaborative learning community. She understood that this was a process and took time. She believed it could happen, but she was not sure that the entire staff would give the time and energy that was needed for this endeavor. Should she wait for everyone to come along, or begin with a core group of interested teachers? How would she include parents in the team building model that was necessary for success? Was she prepared to take a risk and allow more voices to be heard?

John Jessie also realized the urgency of the situation at P.S. 911. He was told about this school when he interviewed for the position of district superintendent. It was his task to make the school better. He argued that the school had been given time and nothing had happened. Would he use the knowledge he had about building a collaborative team and its success rate, or would he continue to issue directives about how things must be done? Would he act on his brief

observations that most of the teachers in P.S. 911 were not knowledgeable about teaching reading? Would he realize that it was necessary to spend more time in each classroom before making any further recommendations? He knew that, at times, and in certain situations, a directive approach was necessary, but would he be sacrificing the opportunity to build staff cohesiveness and the development of an adult learning community? And what about the parents? His experience in Florida taught him that parent involvement was an integral component of a successful school.

Discussion Questions

1. How can English Language Learners become part of NCLB in a fair and just way?
2. Why are central education offices reluctant to involve teachers in the planning and restructuring of failing schools? Why are they averse to support professional learning communities?
3. Why are teachers so reluctant and fearful to share their insights and concerns and assume an educational leadership role?
4. How can parents be made a part of a successful school?

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