

## **CASE STUDY**

### **THE JACOB RIIS SCHOOL**

#### **(PS 126)**

#### **I. Introduction**

The Jacob Riis School [PS 126] is a high poverty urban school housed in a facility that is beautifully appointed with student art and academic work, a garden court yard, well lit corridors and classrooms, and every inch is immaculately maintained. It was built in the 1960s and has served the purpose of schooling ever since. This is a state-designated community school; that is, a year round educational program extends into the evening and includes educational opportunities for parents.

PS 126 enrolls over 600 students in grades K–8 and has a poverty index of 91.7%. Its racially mixed student body is 4.7% White, 27.5% African American, 42.2% Hispanic, and 25.7 % Asian and other. The school has 51 teachers and a full-time principal. The principal of PS 126 has devoted nearly his entire professional career to PS 126, starting as a teacher in the 1970s, assigned as assistant principal in the mid-1980s, and tenured as principal in the past year. Except for two brief administrative assignments at other schools, he has “grown-up” with the school and its community. In addition, three District 2 staff developers are assigned to the school for a portion of their time, one of whom is contracted for 37 days during the school year to work primarily with teachers in the primary grades.

**On measures of standardized reading tests, PS 126 has made the most dramatic progress in literacy of all District 2 elementary schools. Not only has it reduced the percentage of its students in the lowest quartile (down from 46.6% in 1992 to 29.0% in 1994), but it has also increased the percentage of students in the highest quartile (up from 8.8% in 1992 to 18.3% in 1994).**

**The achievement data for 1996 to 1997, shows that this school has reduced the percentage of its students in the lowest quartile (down from 37.2 in 1996 to 23.6% in 1997), but it has also increased the percentage of students in the highest quartile ( up from 11.6% to 13.5%). At present, 44.9% of the students are reading at or above grade level and 48.9% of the students are at or above grade level in mathematics.**

## **II. School as a learning organization**

**PS 126 operates as a learning organization via individual and collaborative planning and processes. On a yearly basis, the district administrators request the school principals to put in writing [in narrative form] their supervisory goals and objectives for the school year, and they are advised to use the narrative as a working document. Principals write realistic plans for instructional growth based on past achievements and present needs. These plans include: a plan for improving instruction through the use of professional development; a description of the work that the principal will be engaged in with his/her staff to focus teaching and learning toward meeting standards; and an explanation of how the**

principal plans to use the budget to support the initiatives. For example, in 1996 the principal

acknowledged the need to continue the focus on purposeful teaching as it relates to standards.

### **Principal's Working Theories and Perceptions**

His 1996-97 "Supervisory Goals and Objectives" were detailed on four pages which addressed learning initiatives in the following areas: literacy, mathematics, interdisciplinary, bilingual/ESL, parent involvement, and special education. An entire page was devoted to literacy. To advance the literacy initiative at PS 126, he stated the importance of understanding how assessment informs literacy related instruction. Specifically, he wrote:

**Most of the preceding five years have been spent on encouraging teachers to develop the "TOOLS" that make them more effective teachers. While we continue to work on effective strategies, my focus this year is for staff to reflect on their teaching by looking at student work, as they match that to standards, with particular focus on the at-risk lowest quartile.**

Hence, he urged his staff to define expectations [road maps] that are developmentally and instructionally appropriate at benchmark grades and to set standards through criteria for best student work. This year's approach shifted the focus from encouraging teachers to develop the tools that make them effective, and invited them to reflect more on their teaching by looking at outcomes—student work.

**All staff development in the present year focused on: (1) continuing to develop sound teaching strategies; (2) understanding grade curriculum; (3) planning appropriate curriculum/skills outcomes for student; (4) looking at examples of "good work"; and (5) looking at the work of children at-risk and planning appropriate instruction.**

**The principal's plan for implementation called for the following activities: (1) Linking all support staff to specific targeted staff for continued focus on effective strategies and assessment. This year, fourteen teachers were new to PS 126. The principal specifically asked one of three staff developers, in addition to his other duties, to work closely with teachers newly assigned to the primary grades. (2) Giving all classroom teachers common preparation time for ongoing collaboration. We observed that this time was spent in a variety of ways: collaboratively, in teams, in pairs, and individually. There were no set patterns or routines. (3) Arranging the school day into large blocks of uninterrupted time for a reading agenda. Specifically, there was a two-hour time block for reading each day. (4) Enrolling teachers in literacy courses. During the 1995-96 school year, fourteen K-8 teachers participated in the CLIP course. This year, that number was expanded to include six K-2 grade teachers and seven 3-6 grade teachers in a Focused Literacy Network called "Mentoring Children's Reading Development." (5) Providing for staff participation in**

**district networks on standards for teaching and learning. A focus on standards was an explicit component of the 1996-97 principal's plan. Compared to last year's plan, this was a distinguishing feature. The principal is a committed advocate of the standards movement**

**and was one of three District Two principals actively involved in a national project on standards.**

**Regarding evaluation and assessment, he advised the district that: (1) teachers would keep a record of implemented strategies, instructional plans; and evidence of student work especially by students at risk; (2) all school site educators would continue to accumulate and discuss writing at each grade level to help set criteria for examples of good work; and (3) everyone would engage in constant reflection, assessment, and celebration of accomplishments. In addition, all classroom teachers were requested to submit a list of students at-risk along with a plan to address their individual needs.**

**The interview and observation data revealed how the principal was aware of his responsibility for: the literacy initiative, instructional improvement, the assessment of individual teachers, and discerning appropriate fits between teachers and available resources. He did not operate alone in his administrative capacity. At PS 126, two formally contracted teachers were informally utilized as his managerial administrative assistant, and his instructional assistant. A former supervisor served as his vice-principal. This administrative network**

**supported and assisted the principal in meeting his responsibilities as designated by the district. The dynamic of this administrative team communicated to the teachers the important messages: (1) that he, alone, was not the leader and (2) that they, alone, were not the learners. The**

**message, received by all, was that together they would lead and learn. In addition, there were three staff developers assigned to the school. One staff developer was assigned to work with the primary teachers. Both the principal and the staff developers said they usually communicated informally at the school site and, more formally, by weekly fax. When we requested copies for document review, the principal gave us one original facsimile, sent and received on a Sunday. In our estimation, it clearly served four purposes: to schedule upcoming site visits, to review services provided in the previous week, to outline future work, and to request feedback on "what is needed, and with whom" for the coming week.**

**The principal sees his role as a "motivator and a hard taskmaster". He readily admits that he is impatient. He believes that he should provide an environment where ideas and visions can be challenged. He also believes that he should surround himself with people who know more than he does.**

He speaks about the life of the school in metaphors and analogies that move both heart and mind. Specifically, when we asked him for evidence of payoffs from the professional development initiative, he said this:

I'm trying to think of a great analogy. You prepare a baby's room, you know, as a parent. Maybe that's the best analogy. You prepare a baby's room and you start by thinking about colors and you think about pieces of furniture and maybe a carpeted thing. And it's sort of like that. You know, you go and you begin somewhere, and then you just see the whole thing come together and to grow and begin to connect. And when you're so motivated or you're so involved or you're passionate about something, you notice things....

He identified productive linkages between and among school personnel,

...sometimes you'll see something Grace is doing that you saw in Sandy's class. Or sometimes, or, very often, especially with Linda and Rachel, you'll see similar strategies but with a different flair. And you know that communication is ongoing. You know that there is a collegiality.

Not only does he see the linkages between and among people, but he helps to make them happen. "Very often, I'll walk into a room, and I say, "you know, I see this is good, you should take a look at so-and-so. ...you can't do it unless you're in the rooms a bit."

As in every institution some of the linkages are weak. The principal pays careful attention to the weaknesses at PS 126 and works to strengthen them. For example, he does formal evaluations of teachers that he views as incompetent or unsatisfactory while doing informal observations of

everybody else. His goal is to "...improve their [teachers] instruction, ... build on their affinities in the same way you're building on the affinities of children.... encourage them to continue what they're doing well and build a trusting relationship so that they recognize what they need to learn."

He sees planning and evaluation as integral to the effectiveness of the literacy initiative. About teachers' planning, he admitted,

[it is not going] as well as [it] should, but, interestingly enough, as the professional development has improved, as we've taken a better look at the needs of children, [teachers] now are forced [to plan], ....when you walk into a room, when you have a good literacy environment and good literacy agenda going on in a morning, the only way it works is if it's carefully planned. If it's not carefully planned, it won't work. You can't wing it.

When we asked him the value of the district requiring principals to write goals and objectives on a yearly basis, he offered the following thoughts.

...things change and grow at such a fast rate, that sometimes you're on such a train ride that you... constantly...go back and look at them.... You know, in the beginning years, it was a bit frustrating because I had set my goals so high that ...I couldn't do it all, and they were very sweeping goals. Some of the sweeping goals were easy to accomplish, so it gave me the illusion that you can accomplish grand things very quickly. But those were easy.

In the face of " grand goals", he realized the need to reflect on why he didn't/couldn't accomplish them. "...my goals became harder...when you get to the fifth and sixth years, your goals are so focused, so minute...you

bang your head against the wall every once in a while. You say, “how come I haven’t done it... I’m taking three months to reach this goal. How come I’ve slipped back to last year’s piece?” He observed that the better the environment gets, the harder it is to go to the next level. In turn, it is more frustrating, because all he can remember is how easy it was in the beginning. "So, it’s fascinating in that respect. And sometimes you’re the only one who sees it all." With poignant honesty, he recalled,

you’re getting all this information from everybody. I mean, you sit in an office as a principal sometimes, and you’re bombarded with information. And sometimes it’s mind boggling at how you actually retain any of it, because they just hit you with questions, hit you with questions. You don’t really have time to even note down your answers. So you have faith...the answers are out there. Then you start connecting, and then pieces of information start collating themselves, and then you see this growing community that changes ... you’re hoping that all of the individual machinery is working out there. And sometimes you’re shocked that it actually is. You’re shocked that there is much more. They give you the ideas that you’ve read about and you get to actually put it into practice in your class room. So there is more communication than you thought.

In talking about the relationship between the district and the school, the principal stated that the practice of “walk-throughs” is a powerful experience for him, "it’s the way I react to them. And also the fact that I have faith in the person’s eyes who’s looking.”

Sometimes I get very frustrated because she [Deputy Superintendent] does see something that I’ve missed, or she sees it in a different way that pushes me to the next level... Like for instance, if she sees things on a bad day, and I know I’m better

**off than she thinks I am, and she gives me advice that I'm already doing, well, in a way, that's really good for me, so I take it as if it's almost fresh and new. So, I'm smart enough to say... Well, you know, first of all, her job is to help, so why deprive her of that experience, because that makes her feel good about what she's doing, especially if I agree with what she's saying. So, you know, you have to be a little thick-skinned here. You know, you say, well, she can't see what you know. So, it's okay, she'll see it the next time.**

**The Deputy Superintendent talks about the environment that she sees and the learning strategies she encourages; the principal realizes that his job**

**is to figure out how to deliver the appropriate environment and effective strategies to support teaching and learning. He instinctively knows what she**

**is going to say before she says it because, he believes, "there are no secrets in education. I think we know how children learn and what are good environments." Furthermore, he has reason to believe that nobody understands the children of PS 126 as he does. "Nobody."**

### **Teacher's Perceptions**

**The important threads evidenced between and among the teachers at PS 126 which show the impact of the district's professional development initiative are collegiality and collaboration. Teachers exhibit an openness to sharing classroom practices, a commitment to the open exchange of knowledge, collective planning and design of instruction, and the expression of a shared vision in the fact that all children can learn to read. Most of these teachers are not afraid to question their own practices and to**

open them to the critical review of colleagues. What follows are brief summations of several typical teachers' expressed philosophy of learning and their perceptions of the school as a learning organization.

The classroom practice of teachers is often talked about and viewed in the larger context of school and district practices; the contexts of teaching and the experience of teachers plays an explicit role in the delivery of professional development; professional development activities which are offered are perceived as meaningful, intellectual, social, and emotional by the teachers; this initiative prepares teachers to employ techniques and perspectives of inquiry; and, it invites and supports critical analysis of content and delivery.

### **Teacher A**

Teacher A holds a Bachelors of Science Degree in Elementary Education. Teacher A believes and admits that she has “a lot to learn. In one interview, she stated, "I really want to learn how to balance, how to get in everything I want with the time I have. ...I don't feel like I've been getting everything in that I'd like to...I have a feeling that most people feel that way."

Undergirding Teacher A's beliefs is an ongoing process of self reflection. " I just always question what I'm doing...why it is important, especially with teaching, you have so much to do that you can never get everything done, so you just have to prioritize and always check to make

sure if spending time on something is really important?" Teacher A is concerned with the economy of time. She believes that she must use what she has in an optimal way. Another piece of her belief system relates to the appropriate match between instructional strategies and learning styles. "You have to teach them [students] in so many different strategies because different kids work better with different strategies, different words, different sentences and different literature." She also believes that it's important to keep in mind the home context of the children. She states, "one of the things I try to make them [students] feel is that this is their classroom...like I try to make the kids decide on the rules and of course then they decide on the consequences, they decide how they want it run...So it's really theirs -- they've created a lot of this along with my guidance."

### **Teacher B**

Teaching in District 2 is "a whole different approach than I've ever been exposed to," says Teacher B, a fourth year teacher. "The school where I taught in Georgia had only general state student guidelines and objectives. There's the objective of the textbook and there are the state guidelines and you teach that page or worksheet for the day. And it's terrible now that I think about it.

It's a lot of worksheets, books, and sitting at the desk...not moving out of your desk." Being a new teacher among other new teachers, she has observed, "We're in the same boat; we're all new teachers and we're all having a lot of the same problems. Teacher B believes that she has to "do a

lot of teaching in the beginning to kind of guide them [students] and show them and help them...because after they know how to do things and what to do, they do it." She also reports that she values the principal as part of the working "team" at the school site. "I feel that he is in there with you.... he gets down and dirty with all of us. He even cleans up."

### **Teacher C**

Teacher C, a sixth year teacher, has a BA in Education and an MS in Reading Education. A native from Hong Kong, she said, "I don't remember exactly how I learned to read but what better way to learn how to read than to constantly read. I read all of the time." She is currently teaching kindergarten and will remain with the same group of students for three years. She believes that the best way to learn to read is "to constantly read." Teacher C has a keen sense of the skills students need to become literate and she believes children should be taught all the strategies that will enable and

encourage them to read books on their own. She believes in strategies that invite students to "interact with the book." About her own literacy practice, she said, "I don't just read the words and go on, sometimes I get so angry when I am reading something or sometimes I laugh...I might even talk to a character. You know?" Her self reflection mirrors what she believes is important for the children. "To teach them all of the strategies they need to be able to read books on their own...." Teacher C's beliefs are strong and

explicit; in fact, they motivate her aspirations for the students. "I am leading them, I am kind of like—making them know that they can interact with a book. [They] can become part of the story, have feelings about what the character does or does not do, and things like that."

For Teacher C learning is just as important for teachers as for students. "I always go to workshops to learn different ways of doing things." Teacher C seeks out new ways of doing things with the children so that the children do not get bored.

### **Teacher D**

This is Teacher D's twentieth year of teaching. She has a BS in Education and an MS in Advanced Education. She has taught grades pre-k to grade 2, grade 4, and grade 6. This is her 10th year at PS 126. Her first ten years of teaching were spent in a Catholic school on Staten Island. When asked to get specific about her practices as they relate to the professional development initiative, Teacher D offered some interesting and positive

insights.

**The teaching of reading has changed because of professional development. ...It's changed the outlook on how you've taught, you know, teach it. We always worked in small groups, I guess for as long as I can remember teaching. ...You did certain things but you didn't maybe understand the concepts...of guided reading, shared reading, independent reading, you know, the purposes that were behind them and the importance of the match of doing them...**

Teacher D's classroom invites children to read and learn. When they enter class in the morning, they choose a book to read independently while Teacher D greets parents and takes roll. This is followed by a class meeting where children share news items and celebrate each other's achievements. Children then work in small reading groups for a two hour block of time. Activities include shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. Teacher D talks a lot about working closely with colleagues. She team teaches with two other teachers on a daily basis. "...I don't think you're gonna get three people as committed as the three of us are...we come in early in the morning...most times we don't leave before 4:30 or 5...[then] you still lug book bags home...it takes a tremendous amount of time and teamwork. And we're very lucky to have that."

### **Staff developers' perceptions**

#### **Staff Developer A**

Staff developer A is an Australian educator who worked in the Victorian Education Department in that country for thirty years. Among the positions he held was that of principal. He was contracted by District 2 to work with the teachers on the professional development literacy initiative after his involvement in a writing project at a major American university.

Typically, his week begins on Sunday when he plans what he will do in the school and faxes that plan to the principal. This communication comprehensively addresses his schedule, the district people with whom he has consulted in recent days, the needs he has identified for further work, how he intends to meet those needs, and invites the principal's feedback on his work. For teachers who may need clarity about how to do literacy activities, he provides extensive modeling. For example, on one occasion he reported to the principal that he "worked with Teacher B and showed her how to take a Running Record while students are in Sustained Silent reading. It takes less than 3-4 minutes, and gives a purpose for the next day's Guided Reading. Teacher B doesn't really know what Guided Reading looks like. Will model if necessary next time." This shows how well he knows the teachers he works with and the detail with which he attends to their needs. Also evident in this data excerpt is the extent to which he communicates with the principal and other individuals at the school site. When asked to describe his overall thinking of the professional development initiative, he had this to say.

**My perception is that this building is changing rapidly,...people have actually started to really think about their management. I think they're changing the way they manage things to accommodate groups, individual conferences, and classroom practice, which is what we are asking them to do. ...They are starting to see that collaborative classroom activities and cooperative classroom activities [can help] everyone succeed.**

About the school per se, Staff Developer A has come to believe that it is "an interesting place where there are pretty strong teacher networks that are not formalized."

While on site at PS 126, Staff Developer A gets around. Before school, he sees different groups of teachers having a cup of coffee and talking about reading strategies they intend to use in the course of the day. It is not uncommon for him, then, to visit the classrooms of those teachers to check out the actual use of these strategies. And, he reports that he is seldom disappointed. "I know it all sounds a bit vague, but actually, I found in this building its quite a strong tactic to use."

"We're trying to take the next step...to get people to identify something they do well, something they are confident at doing, and get them to transfer that to another person. We're trying to get them to work with a colleague or a group of colleagues to get into place what they do well...." To assess the effectiveness of his own efforts, he looks at student outcomes.

I do, I look at student outcomes. I try to look at the amount the kids are reading, the quality of their reading. I'll look at the engaged time that kids read and write. I'll look at the product. And then I have to take a step back and look at how that happened.... but I think first, I will look at what the kids are doing.

### **Staff Developer B**

**The professional developer in the middle school is a former high school English teacher. She is on the faculty of the English Education department at a major American University. She, also, was contracted by District 2 to work with the teachers on the professional development literacy initiative after her involvement in the same writing project as the elementary school staff developer. This is the second year the staff developer has worked with the middle school. Her support in classrooms is aligned with the principal's goals and the teachers' needs and goals.**

The principal's vision to improve instruction so that all students will learn and reach high standards is school-wide; consequently, the professional development in the middle school is linked with the work being done in the elementary school. The middle school is in its beginning stages - this is really its first year as with a full complement of grade levels. The previous year there were two seventh grade teachers . Last year's fifth- and sixth-grade students moved in the middle school this year creating a grade 6-8 middle school with a staff of seven teachers.

The professional developer's schedule begins with an 8:00 a.m. meeting with the staff. She is, then, in a classroom for the 9:00-11:00 a.m. literacy block, modeling instructional strategies, watching student interactions, talking with students and the teacher. Each day she is in a classroom working with a teacher, she and that teacher plan a meeting in the afternoon during the teacher's prep time or during lunch to debrief; assessing how the

overall progress of a unit is going and how specific instructional strategies are (or aren't) supporting students' inquiry, looking at student work, addressing the needs of individual students and planning next steps. When it is appropriate, the professional developer shares professional articles or books with the teacher to discuss theory and practice in relation to what the teacher is doing with her students.

On a typical day, the professional developer meets with the principal from 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon to address the progress of the middle school and plan with the principal the direction of the professional development. In the afternoon, until 2:45 p.m., is spent meeting with individual teachers or in classrooms during the middle school elective classes. At 2:45 p.m., the staff has common meeting time, which is scheduled based on their needs. Often, the staff will meet as a group to continue the morning discussion, or the professional developer meets with teacher individually, or in small groups-often on grade level - until 3:30 p.m. Generally, at 3:30 p.m. the professional developer meets, again, with the principal to continue the dialogue and planning group, to continue the morning discussion, or the professional developer meets with teachers individually, or in small groups-often on grade level- until 3:30 p.m. Generally, at 3:30 p.m. the professional developer meets, again, with the principal, to continue the dialogue and planning around the direction of the middle school. The professional discourse is key to the professional developer's success. The foundation of her work is embedded in the talk that revolves around student learning and best teaching practice. The conversations guide the focus of the modeling and planning done with

individual teachers, the collaborative work with the group, and the discourse with the principal.

The evolution of the professional conversations, and their direct link to deepening thinking and reflecting on practice, is worth looking at for the sake of productive professional development. A professional developer can support and build on reflective practice classroom by classroom, increasing incremental growth, but developing truly collaborative practice, focused on discourse among colleagues for cumulative growth is more complicated.

The principal scheduled time for 8:00 a.m. meetings, once a week, when the professional developer was in the building. The initial subject matter of the morning meetings was, in regard to the principal's concern, that the middle school curriculum was not challenging enough. Consequently, the first meetings were focused on content within the grades and linking transitions throughout the 6th to 8th grade curriculum. However, classroom instruction was not improving. It became clear in conversations with the professional developer and the principal, and with the professional developer and staff, that to benefit the students' learning, the focus of the meetings should shift to instructional strategies and process. It was, at this time, that the teachers, principal and professional developer decided to look, specifically, at the teaching of reading during the literacy block of time. On a broad scope, every teacher agreed to come to the meetings to discuss theory and practice to help every child become a better reader. On a concrete level, the focus of the

meeting would be critique methods which addressed supporting the learning of every child connected to the New Standards 25 book reading standard juxtaposed with the New Standards response to literature standard-the latter providing us with student work to look at and discuss instruction in connection with students' strengths and challenges. Every teacher decided to have students keep reading journals to write responses to literature and to keep annotated lists of books read in the back of the journal.

Looking at students' responses to literature became a bridge for theoretical and instructional discourse around the teaching of reading, and helping all students reach the reading standard. This topic became the focus for consequent meetings, as well as, professional development days for the staff. As meetings progressed, the kind of talk the teachers were engaged in became deeper and focused on student learning. Initially, the staff developer provided samples of student work to look at during the meetings. The reason for this was twofold: first, the staff could be objective about work from unknown students and, second, the staff needed to create protocol for how to look at student work to improve practice. By the last months of the school year, the middle school teachers built a culture for looking at their own student's work, not just "best" work, but samples of work which indicated areas which were in need of improvement, directly linking student process and progress with instructional needs. For the sake of successful professional development, it's useful to note the intensity and focus of the teachers conversations indicated the value of ongoing talk around specific areas of interest.

### **III. School as a learning organization for students**

**Multiple arrangements are in place to provide continuity of teaching and learning for all students over a sustained period of time. The idea of looping, making connections to students for longer than one year is considered a "major piece." Some teachers remain with their students from kindergarten to grade 2 so that they have a three year expanse of possibilities. This enables those teachers to get to know each student better and therefore adapt what they know is the best teaching practice possible for the student.**

**There are multi-grade organizations comprised of groups of children of various ages such as 6, 7, and 8 year olds. The principal states, "[this] forces the teacher to plan away from the age of the child and more to the child's special affinities...they're looking at ...where the child is and that tends to blend grade lines and force instruction along the groups that are more rigorous for specific academic needs. "**

**With special education students, the focus is on intervention and prevention in the lower grades. School staff make every effort to clearly assess where a child should be by identifying and providing necessary support services in the regular education setting. School staff have developed an inclusion model which has been successful to the point that some children who were previously identified as special education students have been decertified. The principal states, "in our educational**

**environment...it helps us in defending this piece that it is a racist dumping ground which in reality it is....it is hard to deny that there are more minority kids in special education."**

**Management and time is another issue; he states, "we have freed ourselves of bells and schedules...there is an opportunity to share...think ...reflect." The principal and his staff pride themselves on their ability to collaborate. This collaboration has resulted in a "respect for effort." He states, "there is a collaboration that is felt amongst the kids and that is modeled for the kids and that the kids also model for each other."**

**The principal would like to say that he is most proud of the academic achievement of his students. He admits that they are not there yet. He believes that they have not fulfilled this "dream" because there are other pieces to put into place first. He refers to effort and rigor that must be present in the fiber of every child...parent...teacher working together as a community. He states, "[this] doesn't happen magically."**

**When the researchers asked the principal and his team about how students are grouped for instruction and why, he replied, " heterogeneous, except for guided reading lessons." He went on to say they he thought that there should be guided mathematics that group children based on their needs.**

### **Families as Partners**

**As a community school, the PS 126 facility is used throughout the year and serves children and their families from the early morning hours, when teen and older parents drop off their infants and toddlers so that they can attend adult education programs, until late afternoon when the after-school program ends. Parents, grandparents and other family members, and**

**community members with no children currently enrolled in the K-8 program are deeply involved in the life of the school.**

**Family and community adults are key partners with school staff and agencies working to create a more viable learning environment for children. They serve in volunteer positions as lunch room monitors, accompany classes on field trips, and produce and publish a literary magazine containing the work of students, staff, and parents from the school community. The Parent's Association at the school takes an active role in communicating with parents about the school programs.**

**Family involvement at PS 126 is very extensive and generally regarded as mutually supportive. The relation that exist between the school, the students' families, and the surrounding communities, however, is not merely a function of its community school designation. A family neighborhood worker, who has worked at the school long before the present principal started there as a teacher in 1970, functions as a sort of "school historian." She helps to organize workshops for parents on topics of child development, budgeting and finances, arranges services for children,**

**and mediates school/community relations. She states, "I've seen it all -- the good, the bad, and the ugly."**

**She recounted the decimation heaped on the families and community by drugs and violence that had sometimes found its way to the school's front door. She, the Community School Coordinator, and other parents interviewed who were long-term residents of the neighborhood told of the principal attending the funerals of former students and their parents, of teachers and children not being safe outside the building, of student fights, and of teachers who did not believe or expect the students to be capable of learning. They spoke of a school under siege from inside and from without that had been turned around by efforts of the principal working with good-willed adults in the neighborhoods and a cadre of committed school staff to forge a community in the school that would move it forward for the sake of the students.**

**PS 126 serves an increasingly poor, tri-cultural clientele who perceive that their children have not traditionally been well served by the school under the former principal. Consequently, there was a high degree of dissatisfaction and distrust of the school under the former principal. The task of getting families involved in ways that support high quality instruction and learning activities. In addition, the principal was faced with creating one school community from three distinct ethnic groups with separate strong traditions of celebrating themselves at school. These separate celebrations were not well-integrated with instructional activities and even competed to some degree with instructional time.**

**The principal and the Community School Coordinator speak of family involvement as a "process" that develops viable and meaningful learning communities for children and the adults who influence them. Like all processes this one took time.**

**In speaking of family involvement at his school, the principal notes that ...they have to be prepared to be committed. They have to be informed, they have to be trained in the same way a professional staff is trained in order to know how to work, how to support , ...properly support an educational institution, you know. ...Whereas initially they were involved. Right? And they were involved in complaining. Right? Then, they just became involved in doing. Not, maybe good work but better than the beginning. And then, they became involved in doing things, that actually began to help us instructionally. And the more and more informed they became, the more and more prepared they became to work the system.**

**The Community School Coordinator, whose own children once attended the school, not only sees family involvement as a process but also emphasizes the role of mutual support between family and school as a means of adult development which is essential to nurturing children as learners. She observed., "We can actually chart the [academic] growth of the students against the growth of the parents." Families from all the cultural groups were brought together initially with activities that did not depend on language skills such as self defense, exercise, and arts & crafts. Then, when people grew more comfortable with one another, trilingual workshops to help them work on parenting skills and supporting student learning in the home were conducted. As parents, get on with their lives, return to school and job training, become more planful about their futures and that of their children, they become more supportive of the academic reforms the school and district are undertaking. Parents in leadership**

roles in the school community, want the teachers and students held to higher standards of instruction and learning. They report that not all parents are "on board," but the parents insist that there is great movement and that more and more parents talk of setting standards for themselves as well.

#### **IV. Standards**

At PS 126 the shared understanding of "standards" is that of "a quality of thinking that makes the connections to prior learnings and future discovery." The principal and staff view the operations of standards as the ability to communicate and explain one's thinking, the ability to problem solve, the ability to teach someone else, the ability to critique and analyze, the ability to judge and compare, and, in summation, "the ability to take everything that is infused in the learning process and use it to create a better world." Regarding the specific applications of standards to grade level, the principal notes that "we are getting better and better at understanding what the standard benchmarks should be for different grade levels." He goes on to say that a shared understanding of standards and benchmarks has resulted in higher expectation levels for teaching and learning. Fairness in the application of standards is viewed as a priority among staff members. Whether one is teaching on the Upper East Side or the Lower East Side the same standard for teaching and learning needs to be understood and applied

by every member of the educational community, including the parents. The standard of activities that take place at PS 126 plays a role in building school culture. That culture is a culture based on professional partnerships, visionary leadership, and centrality of purpose--all aimed at raising levels of student achievement.

#### **V. Variability: Significant learning and understandings**

District 2's central goal is to help teachers improve their practice. Everyone is accountable: administrators hold principals accountable for improvement of teaching practices and principals hold teachers accountable for improving student achievement. There is a direct line of accountability from principal to teacher to student. The District Superintendent selected 80% of the administrators; administrators in turn selected 50% of the teachers presently working.

This is a culture where people care about instruction and all children. The rudder for collegiality is the understanding, acceptance and practice of explicit norms. With an emphasis on explicit norms, a knowledge base is available to everyone which illustrates good practice. In conclusion, there are strong shared norms and strong collegial ties: principal to principal, principal to teachers, and district to principal.

**The district, in negotiation with principals, determines what schools practice. Acceptable student achievement and teacher practice is spelled out in explicit norms. The district provides support for teachers and principals by spending a large amount of time observing their methods and practices in the schools. In addition, the district provides time for teachers to observe the methods and practices of one another. The delivery of professional development is flexible with an array of activities and specific solutions. Professional development has its own priority; it is not treated as a support function outside line management as in most other districts.**

**There is a "critical collegueship" present, as Lord (1994) described. A sense of productive disequilibrium is created and sustained through self-reflection, collegial dialogues, and ongoing critique. Intellectual virtues are embraced; the principal and the teachers seek out and are open to new ideas and are willing to change their long-held beliefs when confronted with contrary evidence.**

**There is great reliance on organized and deliberate investigations rather than learning by accident. The principal and teachers assume collective responsibility for creating a professional record of teachers' research and experimentation. All these practices lead to an increased capacity for empathetic understanding of the problems of their colleagues.**

**In District 2, professional development is set around an accountability model. The principal is held accountable for providing professional development in literacy and linking it to a specific reading domain. In classrooms, a great deal of reading and writing teaching occurs. Reading scores are rising. Of further interest is the fact that school site staff (i.e. principal and teachers) control the selection of new teachers based on evidence of shared norms and beliefs about the teaching of literacy and the preeminence of children.**

## Appendix: Methodology

### **The Sample: Teachers and Principal, Site, and Process**

Classrooms were selected for this study based on: teacher's level of experience (inexperienced teachers were excluded), apparent proficiency at classroom management, (one teacher with seven years experience was excluded- she was experiencing serious management problems and has since been removed from this classroom), and the teacher's willingness to participate. The choices of the researchers were constrained by grade since for most grades there were only two teachers per grade and the researchers wanted to limit this study to the primary grades- K through 3.

### **DATA COLLECTION.**

Data for the study was collected primarily through interviews and secondarily through observations and documents, as described below. Each round of data collection was followed by analyses which informed the next round of data collection.

- **Interviews.** The researchers conducted a series of interviews with the school site principal, staff developer, and four teachers who were selected by Patton's "purposeful sampling" strategy (1980). The researchers identified teachers at different levels of experience who have participated in the same professional development activities and who teach at the same grade level. The purpose of the interview series was to develop an understanding of the school as a learning

**organization as seen from multiple perspectives within the school community. Interviews with teachers focused on their views of their school as a learning organization.**

**Following each interview, we completed detailed field notes of my impressions and reflections (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Patton, 1980; Lofland and Lofland, 1984)). Our purpose was to interpret the transcripts, to “hear the voices” and “see” the interviewees. Field notes helped to identify questions for future interviews and observations, identify and cluster emerging concepts, and served to document our “sense-making” process (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).**

- **Classroom Observations. We conducted a series of classroom observations of four teachers during periods of literacy instruction. The purpose of the observations was to build an accurate picture of how the school functioned as a learning organization. Observations were completed before the last round of interviews, so that the final interviews could be used to explore any questions or issues they have raised. We scripted each observation and completed detailed field notes at its conclusion to facilitate analysis.**
- **Documents. We collected district and school-based documents relating to my research questions and variables of interest, including the**

principal's annual plan, agendas for professional development sessions and other meetings, etc. We also reviewed the logs of the staff developer, observation records of the teachers, and the teachers' lesson plans. The documents were used to substantiate information we gathered from the interviews and to identify questions for additional exploration.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Data analyses was ongoing. We cycled back and forth between examining collected data and generating strategies for collecting new data, remaining open to information that would not only confirm but possibly disconfirm the questions under study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Our intent was to ensure that we focused on the variables of interest and make adjustments in my methods of data collection where necessary. As researchers, we attempted to understand the data from the participants point of view and made every effort not to change attitudes or confound behaviors in any way.

After each school visit, we conducted a content analyses of the data we collected based on the relevant variables of interest. We also began to build role-ordered matrices of data across interviews, coding and categorizing for common themes and patterns and the extent to which there is agreement and/or “disconfirming evidence” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 216) with respect to specific variables. The analyses helped us to

**identify gaps in the data, uncover biases in my interview questions and observations, and define**

**areas for further exploration. When necessary, we analyzed material several times.**

**The results of analyses with respect to particular variables were triangulated to capture what Murphy calls “the nitty gritty of program operation,” what actually happened [or did not happen], why, and with what impact (1980, p.77). For example, we were interested in factors which may have a strong constraining or motivating effect on the teachers' use of techniques learned in professional development. We triangulated the analyses of data from the teachers (interview transcripts and field notes, documents relating to instructional practices, and field notes from classroom observations) with the analyses of relevant data from the principal and staff developer looking for patterns, themes, and relationships.**

**Validity. To assess the validity or "trustworthiness" of this study, we used the template for validation offered by Elliot Mishler (1990). Mishler advises the researcher to pay careful attention to every component of the study: instrumentation, the appropriateness of techniques for data analysis, the relationship of conclusions to the data, and the role of the researcher to the entire process. Use of this exemplar strengthened the validity of our**

**project. Accounting for who we are, what we assumed, and what we expected in reference to the data and analysis was an ongoing and conscious process. The extended amount of time that we spent at the research site also helped to ensure validity claims (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989).**