

## **Linda Chang, Principal**

The principal, Linda Chang, always had a lot to juggle when the school year began, but this year was especially busy. For the first time the school had a breakfast program for lower-income students, but there was no one to oversee it, and she had to ask quite a few parents until she found one willing and able to run it every day. The school was not only short of staff but also short of space. The spring before, the state had mandated smaller class sizes for the first three grades, and there weren't enough classrooms. After the first set of enrollment figures came in, Linda had to hire two additional teachers and arrange for the delivery of three portable buildings to create enough classrooms. Then a long-awaited donation of computers arrived, which she had promised to the fourth grade. But one of the fourth-grade classrooms was in a portable, and the portables didn't have enough wiring for computers. There weren't many choices, and Linda ended up moving the first-grade Spanish bilingual class into the portable, which opened a well-wired room in the main building for the fourth graders and the new computers.

There were other changes that fall. Linda had to persuade the teachers, whose contracts specified that they did not have to be on duty during lunchtime, that they needed to take the time to walk their students, single file, down to the playground by the cafeteria. At the end of lunchtime, they also were supposed to come down and meet their students and lead them, single file, back to their classrooms. This routine was part of a new system of playground discipline that was developed in response to a crisis the previous school year, when a fifth-grade boy threw rocks and injured a younger child. Rumors circulated about playground violence, and parents phoned the school and e-mailed the principal to express concern. Several teachers met with the PTA board, then with Linda, the principal, and worked out a new set of policies.

Getting 420 students fed and back to class within roughly an hour was a real challenge. When she had time, Linda did her best to be an ordering presence in the cafeteria, helping Matty Harris, who oversaw the distribution of food and kept an eye on students eating at the tables. The cafeteria didn't have enough space for all, or even half, of the school's students to eat at the same time. Students ate in two age-ordered shifts. The older grades went first, because older kids eat more quickly. Thirty-five minutes later, a second bell rang, and queues of students from the first and second grades moved from classrooms to the upper playground, with "bag lunch kids" settling in at the picnic tables and "school lunch kids" lining up to go into the cafeteria. The school lunch line was longer than ever that fall because the number of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch had gone up. Lower-income immigrants were moving into the school intake area, and there had been an increase in transfers to the school from low-income, predominantly African American areas of the city.

## **The Grandmother Encounters School Staff**

One day, early in the school year, the principal saw an older Latina woman, holding a toddler, move along the lunch line in tandem with two girls from Mr. Turner's first-grade Spanish bilingual class. She guessed that it was the girls' grandmother and went over and introduced herself; then she was paged and had to hurry back to the office. The next day the grandmother and the toddler again showed up walking next to Rosa and Maria at the end of the line. The principal was away at a meeting, and Matty Harris, the sole cafeteria worker, was especially hassled because they were once again way behind, and the bell would ring in 10 minutes. Matty asked the students to choose an entrée more quickly.

Carefully holding their loaded trays, Maria and Rosa followed their grandmother to the tables. There was no space left, so Beatriz, the grandmother, went over to Mrs. Harris and asked, "Where can I set my girls to eat?"

"You'll have to go outside," Mrs. Harris said.

Beatriz took the toddler's hand, and with the other hand she gently guided the girls, still carrying their trays, down the stairs and to an empty space at one of the picnic tables. They settled in and began to eat. Then one of the playground aides came over and said, "You can't take school lunches outside; you have to eat them inside."

Beatriz was exasperated. "There was no room inside. What are we supposed to do?" The aide shrugged and walked away.

When Beatriz returned at the end of the school day, she parked the car and went to an area near the portables where she had sometimes seen parents of the Spanish-speaking first graders gather to talk while they waited for their children. She joined the group and discovered that they were also upset that the first-grade bilingual class, which began the year secure in the main building, had been bumped out to a portable. Some of the mothers had also heard about big kids shoving little kids in the cafeteria and about scary walks to the bathroom. They agreed that first graders were too little to put up with these problems.

Discussion of “the cafeteria and the bathroom problems” continued in phone and other conversations, until one of the first-grade parents, Mary Ramos, an Anglo woman married to a man from Mexico, suggested that they go as a group to the monthly PTA meeting that was scheduled for the following Thursday evening. Mary, who was college educated and studying to be a bilingual teacher, was the only one in Latino circles who was active in the PTA. She said that she would present the group’s complaints to the principal.

### **The PTA Meeting**

The small core of parents active in the Sunnydale PTA were nearly all middle-class and college educated. Most of them were White, with a handful of African Americans. The “PTA parents,” as they were known around the school, were aware of and troubled by the mismatch between the educational, income, and racial/ethnic makeup of the PTA and the overall composition of the school (see Table 4.1).

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