

The PTA parents worked hard to bring more resources to the school. They organized fundraisers and ran a scrip program at the grocery store. They served on the school site committee and attended and spoke out at school board meetings. They also tried various forms of outreach to other Sunnydale parents, such as free spaghetti dinners and, when they could get expert help, having key announcements translated into Spanish and Cantonese. They knew that there were big gaps of language and cultural understanding among families at the school and that many of the other parents worked long hours in inflexible jobs and had extremely difficult lives.

Several of the Latino parents had tried coming to PTA meetings in the past, but even if they understood some of the English, half the time they couldn't figure out what was being talked about. Back home in places like Mexico and Guatemala, teachers were the experts, and schools didn't talk about parent involvement. The immigrant parents felt inadequate and excluded when they were with the Americans who seemed to run things. But this time Mary Ramos, the Spanish-speaking Anglo mother who was friendly with them and active in the PTA, would be there speaking out on their behalf, and they were attending as a group with a purpose.

When Beatriz and her daughter Lena entered the auditorium, they went over to sit with the other six Spanish-speaking parents. Mary Ramos sat near the front of the group and softly paraphrased the content of the discussion in Spanish. Beatriz (who migrated to the United States from Mexico when she was 15) and Lena (who was born and raised in the United States) were the only other fluent English speakers in the Latino group.

After an hour of discussion about issues such as the format of report cards, fundraising, and planning for a school Halloween party, the PTA president, an African American man, asked if there were any new items for the agenda. Mary Ramos stood up and turned toward the principal.

TABLE 4.1 Sunnydale Elementary School

Location	Large Western city, population over 1,000,000
Grades served	K-5
Enrollment	420
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Latino • Asian and Southeast Asian • African American • White • Other 	18% 25% 45% 10% 2%
Students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch	48%
Certified teachers	90%

"Ms. Chang, these parents and I have children in the same first-grade class. We are coming to the meeting to figure out if there is some way that our smaller children can be safer. They were moved to a portable outside and have to walk across the playground to the bathroom and older kids bump them."

Lena chimed in, "The younger ones are out by themselves without supervision." Beatriz added, "One of my girls has asthma. She's little, and she doesn't remember to put on a coat and take an umbrella."

The principal responded by describing the various pressures that led to the decision to switch classrooms and put the first-grade bilingual class in a portable. She reminded them that the bilingual class was lucky because they not only had a teacher but also a Spanish-speaking aide who came three mornings a week. Then she addressed the bathroom policy: "Other first graders also have to have hall passes and walk by themselves to the bathroom. Children are dismissed to go to the bathroom during the two recess times, and otherwise only in an emergency, when they go with a partner, take a pass, and go straight to the restroom." In short, she tried to reassure the parents that school policies were being evenly applied and that there were reasons for the switch of classrooms.

But Mary, who was intent on being a spokesperson for a group of parents she felt the school was neglecting, wasn't satisfied. She responded, "They feel that their children are being tossed around. They would like to be involved and help make it smoother for their children."

Beatriz wanted the principal to know about the troubling things she had seen during her visits to the school. "I started going to school breakfast and lunch, to make sure my girls are eating," she said. "I saw kids throw food, and there isn't

enough time for younger kids to eat. And the big kids are on the playground at the same time as the little kids go to the bathroom, and they run into the little kids.”

The problems spilled out, one on top of the other. Linda Chang, feeling she had already addressed the bathroom issue, picked up on Beatriz’s complaints about school meals. “Last year children were handed individual servings. The district is doing things a new way this year, with a choice of two entrées, and the food is better because it’s hotter, but it takes more time. I agree that supervision is limited. If you can”—she looked pointedly at Beatriz—“volunteer to help with breakfast.”

Beatriz replied, “I teach my granddaughters to take this and this. The problem is the big kids; you should have the older ones come after the little kids.”

Linda responded, “We tried, but we feed over 250 every day. Lunch periods are only 35 minutes long, and the older children go first. It’s too slow if the little ones eat first. I don’t like to see big boys and girls pushing little ones. It was a mistake that the older ones came in late that day.”

Beatriz wasn’t satisfied. “Where can I sit my girls to eat? There was no room in the cafeteria, so we went outside, and then the woman, she came and told us, ‘You can’t take your food outside.’ Where are my girls supposed to sit?”

Linda once again suggested a course of action: “We welcome volunteers.”

Then a kindergarten parent spoke up with a different issue, and attention turned away from the first-grade parents and their concerns. At the end of the meeting, the principal, Linda Chang, went over to the Spanish-speaking group and gave them flyers prepared by the PTA that read, “We need volunteers—room parents, library, breakfast, lunchtime, fundraisers, in the classroom. Your involvement benefits your child. Please get involved. They will be proud of you and knowing you care raises their self-esteem.”

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