

# The Crisis at One Elementary School

By Fred J. Solowey

*The fact that 12 of the 22 teachers I interviewed may not return to [our school] next year only begins to explain why I refer to the situation at this elementary school as a crisis.*

At an early March, 2012 meeting of the Elementary School's Local School Advisory Team (LSAT), the Principal was asked by a parent what the teachers present thought about a new program she was about to put into place in the school.

"The teachers won't say what they think in front of me," the principal said in what seemed to me to be a rather matter-of-fact way.

Later that evening, as I thought more about what the principal had said, I grew disturbed. What did this say about the educational environment at the school where my son had been studying and growing for almost six, years, an institution to which I had devoted myself, serving as PTA president for three years?

I had come up with the slogan *Our School, Nuestra Escuela*, and I believed in it: our school belonged to all of us, the students, their parents, the teachers and other staff and the community—one of the most ethnically diverse communities in Washington.

Had the school become a place in which teachers would not—or could not—express their opinions to the principal?

I began to get my answer shortly thereafter when I was approached by one of the teachers on the staff. She told me that things had gotten so bad at the school that she was leaving at the end of the year. (In this document I will use the pronoun "she" when referring to an individual teacher, be they male or female.) I decided to interview other teachers and write a report.

I was shocked and stunned, and after consulting with a couple of other people, decided to take on the project of interviewing other teachers about the situation at our school.

During a period of just over two weeks in March, 2012, I conducted 22 interviews with teachers, each interview ranging from 30 to 90 minutes in length. For several reasons (including limits on my time, a sense of urgency and the extra pressure of high-stakes testing in the upper grades) I decided to focus on those teaching in grades second through fifth. I interviewed 19 of the 20 teachers in that group along with three other educators on the staff.

I was struck by how deeply committed these teachers are to the school and the students and families it serves: how hard they work; how much of their own money they are willing to spend

on supplies and teaching materials; how much they are willing to endure in what has become a very difficult situation.

But I was even more struck by the overall low morale, high stress, work overload, dissatisfaction and fear of retaliation that are widespread.

### **My Biases**

Before I present my overall impressions of how these teachers see the situation at the school, I should explain my own biases and orientation.

Personally, I have been involved with labor unions as a journalist and activist most of my adult life. I believe all those who work for a living—including teachers—deserve and need a voice on the job to protect their rights. I have visceral opposition to bosses who bully, intimidate or retaliate against the people they manage.

I have no expertise in the field of education, per se, though I feel I have learned a lot through active participation in the school these past almost six years. I do not know how to professionally evaluate a teacher except to see how well she connects with her students (and to notice what the former principal called “the spark” and the look in their eyes).

My older brother taught at a famous alternative public school in East Harlem (NYC) for 30 years, a school which was fueled by the collective creativity and community of its teachers, in collaboration with students and their families. That’s how I’ve come to understand what a truly good school is. That’s part of why I have been so suspicious of the so called “reform movement” and the approach of people like former DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee. Fueled by vast amounts of money from those either seeking profits from public education or ideologically driven to destroy it, these reformers seek to turn schools into businesses, speaks of “added value” (as if students were products) instead of educating, wage war on teachers and their unions and often puts people in charge of schools—and school systems—who know much less about educating children than the teachers they seek to marginalize and blame, acting as if they were as replaceable as desks and chairs

### **Other Cautionary Notes**

Before I was very far into the interviewing process, I realized that accurately capturing what the teachers were telling me would be a daunting task. I had promised them total anonymity (which turned out to be extremely important because a large majority feared possible reprisals if they shared frankly). Many poured their hearts out to me and every interview was a *unique* combination of nuanced views, thoughtful analysis and insights, honest self-examination and measured criticism.

On all sorts of issues, like: whether the overall IMPACT system (that evaluates upper-grade teachers substantially on student test scores) improves accountability or is fair to apply to this school (given that the full integration of language skills is a much longer process for English

Language Learners [ELL's]); whether having Master Educators (MEs) come to evaluate teachers is a good thing; and, whether *Readers and Writers Workshop* (a framework for teaching introduced two years ago) works and is appropriate for teaching ELLs, there were generally nuanced and sometimes vastly different views.

Bear in mind as you read this narrative, there truly is no “one size fits all” portrait that will properly capture how every teacher feels. Like any group of people, these educators vary widely in personality, temperament, ability to shut out pressures from outside their classrooms, self-confidence, etc. For instance, when you read below about the excessively heavy stress on teachers this year at the school, bear in mind that there are *some* teachers who said they were not particularly bothered by it.

Veteran teachers interviewed tended to be much more confident in their teaching abilities and practices. Teachers with several years in at our school tended to focus on how they were still developing as teachers. Staff new to the school and teaching noted that the era of “high stakes testing and constant analysis of data” is their only teaching environment in which they have functioned.

*Most* of the teachers who were already on our school staff when the principal arrived at the school appreciate her intelligence and feel that she has made some positive and necessary improvements in the school during her first two years. Many note that they like her personally and that she certainly is under great pressure from the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) to improve student test scores, no ifs, ands or buts.

Thus, many teachers generally expressed the view that the situation in at our school must be seen in the overall context of what has been happening within DCPS. Their criticisms of the Principal and Assistant Principal were generally tempered by this understanding. But, there was general agreement among those who see serious problems at the school that a significant part of the dysfunction has been caused by the policies and practices of the current school Administration.

#### **The Bottom Line**

I did not ask “on a scale from one to 10” questions, but I did quantify the answer to one question.

***Of the 22 teachers I interviewed, 12 said there was a very good chance they would not return to teach next year.***

To be sure, it would take a “perfect storm” for our school to lose all of these teachers. Individual decisions were to be based on a number of factors like working out retirement issues, getting admitted to graduate school or accepted for a job being sought in another school system. For some, the principal’s exit would make it much more likely they would want to stay. For others, that would not matter at all.

The group includes some—but by no means all—of the school’s most tenured teachers, but also teachers who have been at our school for 3-5 years and some who have been here less time.

Only one of the 12 says that the decision to leave has nothing to do with problems at the school.

Questions loom in an era in which former Chancellor Rhee was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* with her famous broom, ready to sweep out all those bad teachers who were holding back positive change in DCPS.

Some of the teachers I interviewed believe that DCPS and, to a lesser extent, the administration, would love to get rid of veteran teachers, often more confident in their own teaching, more likely to question directives and less malleable. Others note the budget savings when veterans leave.

Are there *any* ineffective teachers at our school who should not be in the classroom? Many teachers I interviewed believe there are some “pockets of poor teaching.”

But are the policies and practices in place at the school helping to improve the performance of ineffective teachers? Are they supporting teachers overall? Are they helping relatively less experienced teachers develop their craft? Are they fostering an environment in which teachers can help each other grow as educators? Are they allowing teachers to do their jobs properly?

Let’s look at what the teachers have to say.

### **Teacher Views and Experience Not Valued**

During the summer of 2010 it was decided at a staff retreat that *Thematic Learning* would be the pedagogical framework used for the coming school year. But two days before school started, the principal announced that the school would be utilizing *Readers and Writers Workshop (RWW)* instead.

Numerous teachers mentioned this as an extremely frustrating time when their preparatory work had to be discarded. Teachers were never given the opportunity to express concerns that some had about the suitability of RWW for our school. Concerns that the new approach should be implemented only after teachers were properly trained and adequate resources provided were simply ignored, and, in fact, never even solicited.

Continued problems with RWW—and the apparent refusal to acknowledge them—were a recurrent theme in many of the teacher interviews. Issues of inadequate training, evaluations by MEs who don’t understand RWW, mixed messages from the administration and English Literacy Coach on how to utilize RWW, the program becoming increasingly scripted (thus leaving less room for teachers to use their own best practices), the unavailability of resources

in Spanish for the program, the failure of the administration to locate and procure existing school resources, the hiring of a consultant with no experience applying RWW to ELLs and a widespread feeling among many of the school's teachers that RWW simply does not allow for the proper teaching of the Spanish language, were all raised.

Concerns about the rollout and follow-through with RWW echoed concerning other programs and initiatives introduced into the school: no teacher input.

"It would be great," one teacher mused, "to have a principal who valued the input of teachers.

A few other typical comments:

*"I don't agree with some of the ways things have been thrown at teachers, who should be seen as professionals and asked their opinions. There should be dialogue, not just top-to-bottom decisions."*

*"The biggest flaw at our school is that the administrators do not believe in teachers."*

*"There was a belief coming into our school that everything was wrong."*

*"They just don't listen to teachers."*

*"[the principal and assistant principal] think they have all the answers."*

*"Our opinions don't matter, our ideas don't matter. For them it's 'our way or the highway.'"*

*"They only hear what they want to hear."*

*"If [the principal] only believed in the staff..."*

*"We're never asked what we've been doing that works."*

*"I haven't been able to connect with her or be comfortable with her. The times we have said things or spoken up we're looked at in a certain way instead of her accepting the truth of what we're saying."*

*"They just don't like it when teachers stand up for practices that work."*

*"We're never included in the dialogue about what's working."*

Many teachers lamented the fact that team meetings (meetings of each grade's teachers) are now totally dominated by the administration and its demands for data. The administration, teachers say, now sets the agenda and leaves no room for the raising of teacher concerns, let alone discussion of what is working, discussion of specific students or sharing of ideas.

Most recently, the parent leaders were informed that the school was to participate in yet another educational initiative, *flamboyant* (which involves teachers making home visits) we were told that teacher participation was to be voluntary. Apparently, the “voluntary” part was not mentioned to the teachers. “It was not up for discussion. We were told we were doing this. We were all in shock,” one said

Any supervisor who fails to listen to or learn from the front-line experience of employees is not doing her job properly.

For a principal with no knowledge of the school or bilingual education and no experience in dealing with ELLs to take that approach seems especially unwise, several teachers noted.

### **Retaliation, Intimidation and a Climate of Fear**

*Teachers are so scared. There’s not a happy soul in the building.”*

*“They use a lot of scare tactics, almost like bullying. We’re being bullied to do things.”*

[the principal’s] statement that teachers would not say what they thought in front of her has proven to be chillingly correct.

There is widespread fear among the school faculty that the principal the assistant principal — will retaliate against those who dare to speak out or disagree with her.

Even worse, I was given a number of examples of such retaliation—often reflected in lower evaluations, denial of legitimate leave requests or being “written up.”

**The fear runs so deep and many teachers asked that I not include specific incidents involving them or include certain things they’ve said for fear of further retaliation.**

As one teacher put it, *“We’re in a climate now when any comment that comes back to them in our name means we will be targeted.”*

Even most teachers who say they have spoken up in the past feel a chilling effect of the administration’s attitude and approach: “I could be next” was a common refrain. Even teachers who have had good overall relations with the administration report having been subject to retaliation

There is also a widespread perception (with evidence to back it up) that a whole host of management tools are being used to try and force some teachers out. Included are teachers who have always had good evaluations before but have seen them plummet this year, along with increased scrutiny of everything they do.

This is an appropriate point to mention again that the BA is under great pressure, presumably dealing with their own fears of retaliation from above.

That may be an explanation, but it is no excuse. This situation is intolerable.

### **Data, Data, Data, Micromanaging and the Lack of Trust**

There's no question that DCPS has become a data-driven school system, as have most—if not all—around the country. Virtually every teacher I interviewed agrees that testing and data collection have served to improve accountability and, to some degree, teaching.

But the overwhelmingly belief is that things have gotten totally out-of-control this year at the school. Making our school an *Achievement Network* (ANet) school this year (again, with no consultation with teachers) has caused part of the problem, teachers report. But teachers stress that the administration's preoccupation with data (even at the expense of adequate classroom preparation) and approach to management have made things much worse. Teachers describe frequent last-minute demands for paperwork and reports—often last-minute because of administrators' disorganization.

What is generally described as an enormous increase in required paper work has gone along with the frequent usurpation of the morning preparation time before school starts, planning periods and lunch breaks.

Let's check in on some teacher observations.

*“On President's Day at around 9:30 p.m. we all received an email telling us that A-Net data was due the first thing the next morning.”*

*“If we don't produce the exact data they want at a team meeting, they punish us with extra meetings. We're left with no time to plan together as teachers.”*

*“They monitor us, check on us and don't trust us. They don't think we're doing what we're supposed to do. They say all of the data collection is ‘for the kids,’ but they just want to keep checking up on us.”*

*“What helps us is time to prepare and teach. All of this data, data, data, evaluate, evaluate, evaluate does not help my students or help me give them what they need.”*

*“The administration does not understand that teachers need planning time.”*

*“The total change in the report cards mid-year was a problem. There were no explanations or guidance at all on how to implement it. When we turned in our comments, they came back to us with a highly inappropriate level of correction. This was a good example of micro-managing.”*

*“You (the administrator) can do a lot of things right but still create an atmosphere that makes the place stink.”*

*“Now they don’t see anything, just numbers. Last year we were able to discuss how to improve things. This year, beyond the numbers they just don’t care.”*

*“They don’t trust what we’re doing. They act like police trying to catch criminals”*

*“There’s a big change since last year. We’re feeling much less valued and our time much less valued.”*

*“It’s gotten ridiculous. Instead of planning for our students, we’re busy getting prepared for the next meeting.”*

*“The way due dates and times are handled is childish. Their assumption is that teachers are trying to duck things. They’re infantilizing the staff.”*

*“It’s all about data now. You have to get it, give it, check it and enter it, whether or not your children have mastered the skills being taught.”*

*“They don’t trust you and assume you’re lying. That’s why they are spot-checking the testing we’ve done. This really is an insult.”*

*“Too many frantic Sunday emails, too many things thrown together haphazardly or at the last minute. It’s disrespectful and unprofessional.”*

*“[Principal] is disorganized and data-driven.”*

*“Sometimes I feel like I’m being treated like an insolent child.”*

*“There are a lot of silly meetings that take time away that our team could have used.”*

*“They ask for so many things at the last minute—no matter what. This makes me fearful and uncomfortable.”*

*“They’re giving us a lot of extra busy work that doesn’t seem to be necessary.”*

### **Support for Teachers?**

There is little question that the administration has a lot to do, too much to do. Teachers understand this and many express strong sympathy for the position they are in. But teachers raise many serious concerns about the lack of support for teaching by the administration.

- Many say, getting teachers the teaching resources they need has not been a priority, nor is getting back to them when they have questions, ask for help or are promised information to help them in teaching.
- Some teachers feel more positive about RWW than others and some managed to procure helpful resources from outside sources, but most teachers agree that the administration has simply not done a proper job in the implementation of—nor resource support for—RWW.
- Though some acknowledge significant progress, there was widespread feedback that the Spanish part of the school’s bilingual program is woefully under-supported—especially as it concerns RWW. One younger teacher observed: *“I just assumed it was because the students are not tested in Spanish.”*
- There is widespread feeling that evaluations done by the administrators tend to be punitive and harsh. Why, some ask, if the goal is to help us improve, do they not observe and give us feedback more frequently?
- Also, many teachers argue, the administration should be advocating for the realities of what bilingual education is all about for ELLs—that it is unreasonable to measure progress on the standard timetable, as the “academic language integration” takes a number of years.

### **Teacher Workload, Stress and Dissatisfaction**

Any discussion of stress has to begin with the IMPACT evaluation system itself. Upper grade teachers receive 55 percent of their evaluations based on student test scores (something especially unfair, most teachers would say, in a school predominantly of ELLs). The ME and administrators evaluations provide the rest. Teachers can be fired over a few 30-minute, often extremely subjective observations

(Somewhat surprising to me was that many teachers felt they were much more fairly evaluated by the MEs this year than by the administration, though this was far from universal. There was much frustration that the MEs don’t understand RRW as well as frustration over getting ME feedback later contradicted by administrators’ feedback.) They also noted lack of adequate coordination between the administrators and the literacy coaches and the mixed messages and confusion that sometimes results.

Given all that has been recounted here, it is no surprise that many teachers report unacceptable amounts of stress and unsustainable amounts of work they have to do at home—with no small part of it resulting from particulars at the school. What's the ratio? I can't answer that.

Teachers report nightmares and insomnia, waking up at 3:00 a.m. to get work done, heart palpitations, teeth grinding other physical problems, marital stress and more.

One teacher told me that her first good night's sleep in a while came because she knew she was going to get to tell me about her situation the next day.

Another could not sleep *after* giving me the interview, feeling so frightened of retribution

Teachers best describe the situation. Once again, not every teacher feels overburdened and stressed. Just most.

*"You see the faces of teachers, stressed out and walking on eggs. I used to go to [the school] happy to be there every day. Now I have to drag myself out of bed. My spouse complains that I'm stuck to the computer at home."*

*"I come in early and do lesson plans and grading until 6:30 or 7 p.m. and work on the weekend. I don't know how someone with a family can do this job."*

*"When [the principal] came I was very happy because of positive changes, better structure and organization. Now it's the other extreme. There's no leadership, just micromanagement and everything is being dictated to us. It is enormously stressful."*

*"So many teachers are feeling disheartened and want to go somewhere else to teach where they can feel better about themselves."*

*"Teachers are being blamed for things when they haven't been given the training and guidance."*

*"The only life I have is as a teacher."*

*"I always thought that when I retire from teaching it would be with great sadness but it has become unrealistically stressful."*

*"Many teachers now feel that as far as the administration is concerned, they can do nothing right."*

*"[The principal] needs to show her supervisors that she is making progress in test scores, so she is making teachers feel that nothing we do is good enough."*

*"[The principal] cracks down on teachers taking small amounts of leave but both she and the [assistant principal] took week-long vacations."*

*"I'll burn out at a young age if I go through another year like this one."*

*"The family sees the change in me. I'm never off the computer at home. There's stress on my marriage and I'm not spending enough time with my own children."*

*"I feel like I could be working all the time now. Effectively planning takes a long time. I've been having chest palpitations because of the stress. My own kids tell me how stressed out I am compared with the past."*

*"I'm just totally exhausted because of all the extra hours I'm putting in now. I stay 3, 4 or 5 extra hours after school and then get up at 3:00 a.m. I'm trying to make sure things are right for the kids."*

*"It's always our fault unless proven otherwise."*

*"I've devolved into being a workaholic. And when I'm not working, I feel guilty about it."*

*"I promised myself when I became a teacher I'd never take the easy way out. I'm working all the time and find it hard to hold friendships. And as a teacher, I'm not growing and learning here."*

*"The administration's attitude seems to be that they don't care if people leave."*

*"I find myself working four or five extra hours at home a night, instead of just one."*

*"The attention we get from the administrators is always negative, never positive. That's bringing down morale."*

### **What About the Kids?**

*"They put handcuffs on you and tell you to fly."  
"They expect us to build things without scaffolding."*

This is, of course, the central question. The administration certainly sees itself as working in the interest of [our school's] students. So do the people running DCPS.

Almost every teacher I interviewed acknowledges that things have gotten better for the students in the past three years in a number of ways.

But I, for one, am worried about how the most important educational resources we have, our teachers, are being treated. I worry about the profound impact on our school of losing many fine teachers. I worry about how the creativity, expertise, passion and experience of many great teachers is being marginalized or restrained instead of being utilized to the maximum.

And I worry about the future of our bilingual school and the special approach to education that is central to it being put on the back burner, or worse.

And I worry how the crisis—and there is a crisis—is hurting teachers and what they can give to our children.

On this last point, I turn to some teacher comments

*“This year we have not been able to do what we know works.”*

*“Not getting to plan together as teachers hurts out students. The short cycle assessments are not best for our kids, but we have to do them anyway.”*

*“They’re assessing way too much. It’s taking too much time from instruction.”*

*“My confidence as a teacher has been eroded this year.”*

*“The underpinnings of discontent and the high stress among teachers, the kids sense it.”*

*“I’m getting no support for becoming a better teacher.”*

*“My evaluations have been fine but I’m getting nothing to help me teach better. There’s no support from the administrators for improvement and teachers have no time to help each other.”*

*“All your free time is taken up by meetings, a flood of spread sheets, data to analyze. I wind up feeling relatively unprepared to teach compared with previous years.”*

*“You want to go into the classroom and inspire kids. If you focus instead on hitting everything you know that the administration wants, you’re performing a disservice to the kids, because they’re not getting the types of lessons they really should get.”*

*“It will be really sad if we send kids to middle school and the only thing they know how to do is take a test.”*

*“The best teachers here find a way to still make their lessons good for the kids, but it’s difficult.”*

*“The reason everyone still comes into work every day is the kids. The growth they’ve having is awesome.”*

One teacher described the current year at [our school] in a particularly poignant way.

*"I haven't yet decided about coming back next year. I figure it can't be any worse than this year. If I do come back it will be in the hope that this year was just an experiment that failed miserably."*

### **Conclusion**

I'm aware that this report is both long, yet probably deficient in capturing the diversity of what the [our school's] educators explained to me about what, in their varying views, is both right, and wrong, at our school.

I apologize to any who might feel their voices not represented here and to all the lower-grade and specialty teachers I did not interview.

As a dedicated union activist, I also apologize for not discussing various violations of the union contract at [our school] and why the contract fundamentally supports—rather than hinders—quality education and a more vibrant educational community.

I also am aware of how poorly I've been able to explain the intricacies of bilingual education, the issues involved with A-Net, etc.

My final apology: during my years at [our school] I have consistently (some might say obsessively) insisted that everything in our bilingual school should come out in both Spanish and English. The urgency of getting this report out to the teachers, parent leaders, the administration and others has led me not to wait for the Spanish translation to be done.

I set out to give voice to the many teachers who feel like they haven't been heard by the administration and who have felt alone, struggling with how to go on being—or become—the kind teachers they want to be. I hope I've done that.

I only have two conclusions:

- 1) There is a very serious crisis of leadership in our school and it must be addressed by our entire community. Some of the practices of the administration must be stopped and some new ways of functioning implemented now.
- 2) To the degree that our current administration is willing to do this, we must join with them in demanding that DCPS take the excessive pressure off and let [our school] continue to develop and grow as the wonderful, multi-cultural, bilingual school it seeks to be.

March 26, 2012.