

You Can't Be Driven by Fear: A Profile of P.S. 24 & Principal Christina Fuentes

by Tom Roderick

Public School 24 in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, Spring 2008. P.S. 24's intimate auditorium is bursting with children, parents, and staff eager to witness the culmination of the fifth graders' work with a resident artist who has been teaching them Mexican dance. Carlos, a fifth grader with no mobility in his legs who has always been painfully shy, appears on stage in his wheelchair. Dressed in costume and holding a microphone, he quiets the audience and explains what they are about to see. As the dancing unfolds before the delighted audience, Carlos, deftly steering his wheelchair, joins in the dance as well. "For the kids I'm sure it didn't seem like anything unusual," reflects Christina Fuentes, P.S. 24's principal. "But for the adults, it was a very special moment."

Fuentes recalls this story in explaining why the arts are an essential part of the curriculum at P.S. 24. "We're trying to provide an excellent education, and understanding the arts is the mark of a well-educated person. The arts provide entry points for kids who may not be academically oriented. They are also a way to express culture. When I was growing up, the arts were really important to me. I was a good student but the arts, especially drawing and dance, engaged me and provided lots of enjoyment." Every year Fuentes manages to find money in her

budget to ensure that every class works with a teaching artist from one of several nonprofit arts organizations involved with the school.

It might have been otherwise. For in 2002, P.S. 24 was labeled a School-In-Need-of-Improvement (SINI) under the No Child Left Behind (N.C.L.B.) Act. Many school leaders have responded to the SINI stigma by making test-prep their top priority.

Not Fuentes. "We do our best to prepare the students for the tests," she explains. "It would be irresponsible not to. But we don't deprive them of a well-rounded education. We ask ourselves, what would we want for our own children? We'd want teachers who are professionals, who are the chief scholars in the room, learning as well as teaching. We'd want a rich curriculum that integrates learning across the disciplines. We'd want social studies, science, the arts, and social and emotional learning."

Fuentes and her staff are strongly critical of N.C.L.B. They have chosen to resist its oppressive policies by keeping their eyes on their vision and refusing to turn their school into a test-prep factory. They have managed to create a great school—against the odds. The story of P.S. 24 is about public education at its best. It is also about the extraordinary efforts required to overcome the barriers current federal, state, and

city policies throw in the way of educators committed to giving low-income children of color the education they deserve.

P.S. 24, the Dual-Language School for International Studies, is located in the largely Latino, working class neighborhood of Sunset Park in Brooklyn. Nearly half of the school's 780 students in grades pre-k – 5 are "English language learners." Most of the children's families have emigrated from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, or Ecuador. Almost all of the students are low-income, with 85 percent eligible for educational services under Title I. Twenty-three percent of the students have Individual Education Plans ("IEPs"), which entitle them to special education services.

The opening of P.S. 24 in 1997 was a victory for the community. During the early 1990s, Yvette Aguirre, then principal of another school in Sunset Park, led a campaign for a new school to relieve serious overcrowding in the neighborhood's schools. Aguirre became P.S. 24's principal, and a year later Fuentes joined her, first as literacy coach and then as assistant principal. When Aguirre retired in 2004, Fuentes took over.

Fuentes grew up on Long Island with a Puerto Rican father, a mother of Irish and German ancestry, and three siblings. They didn't speak Spanish at home.

Explains Fuentes: “My father was born in 1917. He was of a generation that wanted to assimilate into mainstream America. He wanted his kids to grow up speaking English.” Fuentes’ mother was active in Women Strike for Peace. “She pushed me in a stroller to ‘Ban the Bomb’ demonstrations. We attended an activist church. I grew up with a strong sense of social justice, peace, and racial equality.” With her Latino father and activist mother, Fuentes experienced first-hand what it was like to be “the other” in the largely white working class South Shore of Long Island.

Fuentes agrees with the stated goal of N.C.L.B. to improve education for all children, including those often “left behind”: students of color, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low-income families. But she sees N.C.L.B.’s approach as essentially wrong-headed. “N.C.L.B. uses just one measure of student achievement, standardized tests, and that method is deeply flawed,” she explains. “There is plenty of documentation about the class and cultural bias in the tests. There are many other ways to assess children’s progress that give a broader and more accurate view of how children are doing.”

Furthermore, N.C.L.B.’s punitive policies—labeling schools as failing and threatening them with restructuring if students’ test scores don’t improve—too often produce the opposite of their intended effect. Observes Fuentes: “Instead of motivating a school to educate all children,

there’s a disincentive to have certain kinds of children in the school at all. Let’s say that a child is from a low-income family, is an English language learner, is Latino, and has an IEP. If that child doesn’t make adequate progress as defined by N.C.L.B., your school’s N.C.L.B. rating will go down in four categories. Some principals find ways to keep the number of kids like this in their schools to a minimum. A school might hold over a kid multiple times so that he never reaches the testing age and his parents finally get frustrated and take him out. Or a school can limit the number of special education students by not forming special education classes.”

Then there’s N.C.L.B.’s implicit assumption that closing the achievement gap is solely the school’s responsibility. “There are real inequities in health services and job opportunities that affect children’s lives,” says Fuentes. “Schools can’t fix those problems, but they get blamed for things that are the consequence of larger social and political problems of society.” She sees N.C.L.B. as “almost like a set-up to demonstrate that public schools are no good” so that private companies can come to the rescue. Fuentes believes that educators have the responsibility to provide an excellent education for all students, but she wants to see the rest of society doing its part as well.

She would also like government policy to address what Jonathan Kozol called “savage inequalities” in the allocation of resources. Like many schools in low-income communities, P.S. 24 is severely

under-funded, and N.C.L.B falls far short of providing the resources to fill the gap. According to Fuentes, P.S. 24’s budget allocation for fiscal year 2009 is almost three quarters of a million dollars less than the city’s Fair Student Funding Formula calls for. As a School in Need of Improvement, P.S. 24 receives about \$50,000 a year for such things as professional development and instructional materials. That doesn’t even equal P.S. 24’s costs for the testing programs required by N.C.L.B., the state, and the city! “A school like ours needs to have a full-time position dedicated to coordinating the testing,” Fuentes explains. “This is so because of the number of tests—you have English language arts, math, social studies, science, and the NY State English language learners test—and because for each test you have to provide accommodations as required by law for English language learners and students with IEPs.” P.S. 24 has to pay for its full-time test coordinator out of its own budget.

Only by pulling in competitive grants and partnering with nonprofit organizations has Fuentes been able to give her staff and students a portion of their fair share. A federal Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant enabled P.S. 24 to develop innovative ways to address the needs of its English language learners and create its model Dual Language Program. A federal Magnet School grant enabled P.S. 24 to introduce thematic, project-based learning in social studies. The school’s partnership with Morningside

Center for Teaching Social Responsibility has enabled P.S. 24 to implement its PAZ After-School Program and its innovative activities to foster social and emotional learning. None of this comes easy, of course. Chasing grants takes lots of extra work. And all schools should have access to resources such as these, not only the few winners of grant competitions.

When Fuentes and Aguirre got word in 2002 that P.S. 24 was now a School In Need of Improvement, they took the news in stride. “We felt it wasn’t an accurate judgment of the quality of the school,” recalls Fuentes. “We took it seriously, but we knew we weren’t going to let it set our course. We weren’t going to engineer the student body to make our scores go up. We weren’t going to dumb-down the curriculum by turning the school into a test-taking factory. And we weren’t going to browbeat teachers over test scores. I see the principal’s role as a buffer between oppressive policies that come down from on high and the kids, the parents, and the teachers.”

The two school leaders decided to keep doing what they’d been doing all along: providing a vibrant curriculum, including the arts, dual language instruction, and social and emotional learning; continuing the PAZ After-School Program; engaging teachers in developing themselves professionally; involving parents; using data from a variety of sources to improve instruction; and, yes, preparing students for the tests as

best they could—without compromising their principles.

P.S. 24’s dual language program is at the heart of their vision. Half of the school’s 42 classes are dual language with half of the children in those classes Spanish-proficient and half English-proficient. Parents choose whether to enroll their children in dual language or monolingual classes. The aim is that all students in dual language classes learn a second language while developing their first language. “Having two languages is a great asset in getting a job,” observes assistant principal, Mariana Gaston. “And validating the child’s dominant language builds self-confidence.” She doesn’t minimize the challenges, though. Among them: pairing teachers who work well together, providing time for the two teachers to plan together, and developing teachers’ skills in fostering dual language development.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is another priority at P.S. 24. “Attending to social and emotional needs is critical,” insists Fuentes. “If we want kids to be risk-takers intellectually, we need to help them feel safe in school and at home. The more we address emotional needs, the fewer discipline problems we have. It’s not only the right thing to do morally, it helps kids academically.”

Morningside Center has been helping P.S. 24 foster social and emotional learning since the school opened its doors in 1997. Morningside Center defines social and emotional learning as

the process by which we increase our capacity to understand and manage feelings, relate well to others, make good decisions, deal well with conflict and other life challenges, and take responsibility for improving our communities—from the classroom to the world. The school has become a national model, thoroughly integrating SEL into its culture and curriculum and developing innovative practices. P.S. 24 views social and emotional learning as an essential ingredient for success in life and participation in a democratic society. As such, it is for everybody, not only for so-called “high-risk” students as it is in some schools.

P.S. 24’s approach gives equal weight to classroom instruction and student leadership. Teachers help students develop skills in listening, assertiveness, anger management, and problem-solving through lessons based on Morningside Center’s 4Rs curriculum (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution), which integrates conflict resolution and language arts.

Ninety-five students, grades 3-5, trained as peer mediators, help their peers talk out conflicts in P.S. 24’s cafeteria, playground, and classrooms. P.S. 24’s “Peace Helpers” Program got started several years ago when an ambitious second-grader insisted that although he was too young to be a mediator, he knew he could help make peace. Morningside Center’s staff developer Emma Gonzalez trained him to be a peace helper, and he worked with his teacher

to create a peace corner in his classroom. A peace corner is a place where students who are upset or in conflict can go to calm down, read, think, and perhaps discuss their situation with a peace helper. The school now has dozens of peace helpers who have helped their teachers set up peace corners in all K-2 classrooms.

The 4Rs curriculum has a unit on diversity. Students share information about their cultural backgrounds and practice skills in standing up to teasing and bullying. Teachers at P.S. 24 give special attention to the topic during an annual “diversity month” in the spring. A recent innovation, the “student diversity panel,” has taken the work to a new level. A panel typically includes five students representing various forms of diversity (for example, an African-American, a boy who is short, a girl with only one hand, an Asian American, a Dominican-American). With support from Morningside Center’s staff developer, the panel makes presentations in classrooms. Panel members briefly describe ways they’ve been mistreated because of their differences. Then they ask if children in the class have had similar experiences. Finally, they lead the class in discussing what they can do to help make their school a place where such incidents won’t occur in the future. “The impact of the panels has been profound,” says Gaston, “The kids’ stories are heart-wrenching, but sharing them is a first step toward awareness and healing.”

Emma Gonzalez and the school’s guidance counselor have developed a “Lunch Club Program” for children need extra help in managing their feelings and behavior. A lunch club is six to ten students who meet voluntarily once or twice a week during lunch and recess. In addition to children with behavior problems (typically second and third graders), the clubs usually include two or three older peer mediators who assist and serve as mentors for the younger children. In the club meetings, students share what’s going on in their lives and practice skills such as assertiveness (being strong, but not mean).

The focus on social and emotional learning doesn’t stop when the school day ends. Morningside Center partners with P.S. 24 to run PAZ (“Peace from A to Z), an award-winning after-school program that serves 260 of P.S. 24’s children every school day of the year from 3 to 6 p.m. The program also serves 100 students during July and August and on school holidays. PAZ has five major components: conflict resolution, cooperative games and sports, arts education, community service, and homework help.

Partnerships and programs aside, it’s the quality of the teaching that makes the difference between a great school and a mediocre one. Throughout her ten years at P.S. 24, Fuentes has sought to inspire teachers to see the value of continuous learning, to get excited about ideas, and to engage in ongoing questioning and reflecting so that they can

become the best teachers possible. “P.S. 24 is a professional learning community,” says Fuentes. “From the moment a teacher is interviewed by our hiring committee we set the expectation that we will all engage in ongoing professional development in collaboration with our colleagues. This takes the form of yearly faculty retreats, summer institutes, working with consultants and in-house coaches, twice-monthly grade conferences, and teacher study groups on topics of their choosing. Our Saturday retreat last spring consisted of workshops all done by teachers.”

Fuentes recalls one of the teachers’ first projects: working with a consultant to figure out how to make the “interactive read-aloud” effective with English language learners. Says Fuentes: “Teachers tried out practices, observed each other, videotaped lessons, and discussed what they were observing and learning. It was a balance between learning content from an expert and reflective practice with teachers leading their own inquiry. I want teachers to see their students in the same way, to have high expectations for their students’ academic success and personal development.”

In leading the campaign for a new school in Sunset Park, Yvette Aguirre envisioned a place that would be a resource for the entire community. Accordingly, the school is often open on evenings and weekends, and hosts community events. But the priority to date has been engaging parents in the life of the school. Staff go out of their way

to make parents feel welcome. There's always someone available who speaks the parent's language—whether that language is Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Bengali, or Hindi. The school safety agent who signs in visitors is gracious and friendly. A comfortable, well-provisioned parents' room provides space for meetings and projects, such as making costumes and props for student performances. Parent meetings are well-attended. Parents attend workshops on such topics as parenting and health, and play a key role on the active and influential school leadership team. "A high point of our work with parents last year was the diversity anthology," recalls Gaston. "Parents came in for a number of consecutive Fridays and wrote stories about times they had stood up for themselves and others. We put the stories together in a book we distributed to the school community."

Parent involvement, professional development, social and emotional learning, dual language instruction, the arts—these are the passions of Fuentes, Gaston, and P.S. 24's faculty. But looming before them, as a formidable barrier to pursuing their vision, is the extensive program of standardized testing imposed by the city, state, and federal authorities. Like all schools, they have to address the tests.

Fuentes believes in using data to improve instruction—provided the data comes from a variety of sources. By examining data, for example, she saw that many of her students who were not labeled English language learners

(ELL) still needed support in learning English. Reviewing test scores and teachers' running records, she saw that these "hidden ELLs" were struggling, compared with their peers who were truly English proficient. Since then, the school has made a commitment to infusing language development and ESL practices into all teaching across the disciplines. Teachers have met this challenge through action research: They have tried out or invented promising ways to infuse ESL practices into their teaching and used data to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts, tweaking new approaches as necessary.

But while appreciating the value of data when used appropriately, Fuentes and her teachers are sharply critical of the government's testing program. They see the tests as riven with class and cultural bias and poor tools for assessing student progress. What's more, the tests take a toll on children's self-esteem and steal time from activities that truly contribute to children's education. "The tests create a high level of anxiety among the kids," observes Fuentes. "We see that play out during the testing weeks and the weeks after in more arguments, more pushing and shoving, more conflicts on the playground. We have to do more mediation, look out for the kids who have trouble emotionally, and do preventive work—like pulling John out so he can work on a puzzle in the office, not as a punishment but to keep him out of an environment that might trigger him."

Although Fuentes doesn't pressure her teachers to do test prep (and even arranges voluntary test-prep classes for students on Saturdays in an attempt to limit the extent to which test-prep intrudes on the regular school day), teachers feel the pressure anyway: it's built into the system. "Preparing my students for the tests is a constant thought in my mind," says Rachel Bingman, a fourth grade special education teacher. "I want them to be prepared. I truly want them to do their best. However, the layers of learning needs underneath the haze of "test prep" are endless. My students are making progress—maybe in baby steps, but it is happening. But who would know that by looking at test scores? If the state looks at test scores, they'll see many 'ones' and 'twos.' What do those numbers represent? Not my students—and not their learning in my classroom."

What's more, says Bingman, "After so much test prep in the classroom, my students start not to care. They start to think, enough is enough! It's hard to disagree with them. They're thinking about the time ticking away and how much longer it will be until recess begins. However, when we're doing project-based, hands-on learning—like creating the same corn-husk dolls that Native Americans once played with—my students want to come BACK to the classroom during recess to have extra time to finish. I've wracked my brain trying to think of creative ways to make test prep more project-based and hands-on. I haven't gotten very far."

Fourth grade teacher Shirley Guerrero and Martin Alvarado, who teaches fifth grade, echo Bingman's sentiments. They also note that the standardized testing program is especially unfair for English language learners, who make up about half of P.S. 24's students. "Research has shown that it takes English language learners five to seven years to achieve academic proficiency," explains Guerrero. "But students have to take the English Language Arts exam after only a year of being registered in the United States."

The school faced a major challenge when in the spring of 2007 the NYC Department of Education announced that, in addition to all of the other tests kids were taking, schools would be required to administer "periodic assessment tests" (four each year in reading, four in math, and four for English language learners). The stated aim of these periodic assessments is to give teachers data on students' strengths and weaknesses so that they can better target their instruction to improve student achievement.

The Department of Education offered another option—for schools willing to do lots of additional work. Schools could apply to design their own periodic assessments instead of using the standardized off-the-shelf instruments. P.S. 24 joined a network of two dozen other schools and two university partners to create an alternative process for assessing student progress to improve instruction. It took lots of meetings—of the entire network, of

subcommittees, of Fuentes with her teachers—but the Department of Education approved the network's alternative plans, and P.S. 24 doesn't have to administer the Department of Education's standardized periodic assessments. Instead, to assess their students in reading, for example, teachers meet with their students individually, listen to them read, ask them comprehension questions, and keeping running records. "We've developed a process that involves teachers' comparing their results and talking together," explains Fuentes. It's a collegial process that breaks down barriers among teachers and leads to colleagues using a common language."

Shirley Guerrero agrees that this is much better than using the Department of Education's instruments. "I don't consider standardized exams when grouping my students or guiding my instruction because they are not a true reflection of student capabilities. I use student portfolios, running records, and informal observations to assess my students. I find these to be much more helpful since they track student learning and are available immediately. Some of these assessments are time-consuming, but I do feel they serve as tools to accurately measure progress and guide instruction."

P.S. 24 and the members of its "design your own" network have developed a process for ongoing assessment of student progress that involves teachers working individually with students and sharing their insights and ideas

with colleagues. The Department of Education should support all schools in following this more accurate and personal approach for determining how students are doing and where they need a hand.

The clear vision and hard work of Fuentes, her staff, and her nonprofit partners are paying off. P.S. 24 is a model for dual language instruction and for social and emotional learning. Visitors come from near and far to learn from the school's practices. Even the NYC Department of Education acknowledges the school's achievements. P.S. 24 consistently receives an "A" on its report card. The Department of Education gave the school an excellence award for outstanding school-wide progress in math and English language arts, and called the school exemplary in closing the achievement gap. P.S. 24 was one of a handful of New York City's 1400 public schools rated as "outstanding" in all five areas evaluated in the school's annual 2008-2009 Quality Review.

And yet, according to N.C.L.B., P.S. 24 has achieved its "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) only once in the past seven years. Last year the school came within a hair of meeting its AYP but fell short because two special education students, whom the school had nurtured for years, moved out of the school's district and thus their progress could no longer be credited to P.S. 24, even though they continued to attend the school!

What's wrong with this picture? We have already discussed a

number of N.C.L.B.'s shortcomings: judging schools solely on deeply flawed standardized tests; pressuring schools to narrow their curriculum to test-prep in reading and math; and failing to provide the resources necessary to level the playing field for children from low-income families. To those, add N.C.L.B.'s policy of giving a school a thumbs-up or thumbs-down based on whether it meets a certain bar rather than evaluating a school according to how much *progress* its students are making. When a school like P.S. 24 consistently fails to achieve its AYP, one has to question the fairness of N.C.L.B.'s accountability system. Meanwhile the number of "schools in need of improvement" by N.C.L.B. criteria keeps growing. There were 11,547 such schools in the 2007-2008 school year. The SINI label gives mayors and superintendents the excuse to close schools and replace them with charter schools run by nonprofit and profit-making companies. The research so far shows that this approach, heralded as the latest panacea for improving education, is more likely to widen the achievement gap than to close it. A recent report from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found "wide variance in the quality of the nation's several thousand charter schools, with, in aggregate, students not faring as well as students in traditional schools."¹ But the charter school

¹ "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States," Center for Research on Education

bandwagon has momentum, and fuel for the movement comes in part from N.C.L.B.'s flawed accountability system.

Even on its own terms, N.C.L.B. is failing. When passed in 2001, N.C.L.B. was officially described as "An Act to Close the Achievement Gap." But the gap in test scores between white students and black and Hispanic students has not narrowed, according to the latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, considered the best measure of long-term trends in math and reading proficiency. Black and Hispanic students scored much higher than they did three decades ago, but most of those gains came in the 1970s and 1980s, well before the passage of N.C.L.B. ²

N.C.L.B. is clearly a Law-In-Need-Of-Improvement. Call it a LINI, or better yet, a lemon! "Improvement" is not enough: N.C.L.B. needs to be completely rethought and revamped.

Meanwhile, Christina Fuentes offers the following advice to the thousands of educators throughout the country who labor day in and day out to put children first—despite N.C.L.B.: "You can't be driven by fear. You have to be confident of where you're going. You have to have a clear vision and keep your eyes on that prize. You can't sneak around, you can't do this job scared. I must follow my convictions. If this is not

Outcomes, Stanford University, June 15, 2009

² "'No Child' Law Is Not Closing A Racial Gap," Sam Dillon, New York Times, April 29, 2009

acceptable to those in power, they will have to move me on. Some principals are fearful of losing their jobs. But if your decisions are truly based on what is best for students, you can sleep well at night. I'm not going to compromise my deepest convictions. Those convictions are why I do what I do. They're what keep me going."

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