

## CHAPTER 3

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# *Making the Case*

### **Case**

*Jack Dupree, Principal, Kennedy Elementary School*

*Angie Polcheck, First-grade teacher*

*Leo Wall, Fifth-grade teacher*

*Ron Winston, Parent*

*Marguerite Capuzzo, Third-grade teacher*

*Catherine Stempel, Second-grade teacher*

*Roberta Quindlen, Parent*

"Thanks for joining us today," Jack Dupree said as he began the meeting. "As you know, I always appreciate your willingness to give up your time for meetings like these. The primary issue on our agenda today is the use of our professional time during this school year. We have set aside a half-day every month, when students are released early from school, for staff to work together. Last year, there were some concerns that we weren't spending this time well, that we were having sort of a hodgepodge of events—a workshop one month, then onto something else the next month. This group needs to set some priorities for what we do with that time together."

Jack had been the principal at Kennedy Elementary School for a year. The committee that had selected him for the position had been struck by his commitment to involving both teachers and parents in decisions made at the school. When the faculty had expressed concerns the previous year about the way professional time—the half-day per month—was being used, Jack had pulled together a volunteer group of teachers and two parent representatives to design a better plan for using this year's professional time. Gathered around a table

in the library, in the late afternoon on this warm August day right before the start of school were teachers Angie Polcheck, Leo Wall, Marguerite Capuzzo, and Catherine Stempel, as well as Kennedy parents Ron Winston and Roberta Quindlen.

Angie Polcheck, a first-grade teacher, raised her hand "Excuse me, Jack. Could you review for us what some of our options are? I'm not sure what we could decide here today."

"Sure thing," replied Jack. "Basically, the way I see it, there are a lot of alternatives open to us. We could use the time to plan some changes we want to make at the school or to learn more about something new together. We could plan workshops where we bring in somebody from the outside, or we could work on something of our own here. There are some budget limitations, of course, if we are thinking of anything expensive." He smiled and looked around the table. "As you all know by now, I feel strongly that teachers and parents need to have input into these kinds of decisions, so I feel the decision is truly up to this group. My only strong preference is that the time not be spent as regular planning time, but that we use it to help us move on something that is a priority for us."

Leo Wall, a fifth-grade teacher, leaned toward the table. "Marguerite and I have some good ideas about expanding the inquiry-based science program we've been working on." He glanced over at Marguerite Capuzzo, and she nodded in agreement.

Ron Winston responded immediately, "My daughter Samantha was in Marguerite's third-grade class last year and got a lot out of that science program and the kits they were using. But I think, if we're going to keep the program going, then it's got to be in all the classrooms. What she learned last year in science is now going to waste in fourth grade, because it's all reading in the textbook. Maybe the kids are benefiting from that, too, but Samantha wasn't prepared for it, and she's not building on what she learned last year. Science meant one thing last year, and this year, it's something else."

"The fourth-grade classes are taking really different approaches," Leo agreed. "When last year's fourth-graders became my fifth-graders this year, some were already into hands-on work: asking questions, exploring, designing experiments. They were used to handling the science materials, working in groups, even organizing data. But for some of the kids, just working in long blocks of time on science was new. The first couple of months weren't so productive, because first I had to get everyone oriented to what we were doing."

"Okay, so it sounds like one proposal on the table is that we spend some time bringing this program up to full scale, doing some

training with everyone, and working on implementing the science kits." Jack looked around the table for agreement.

Leo nodded. "That's what I'm suggesting."

"We were thinking," Marguerite added, "of having some workshop time early on in the year to learn about inquiry-based science teaching and the new science curriculum kits, and then asking everyone to try one kit in their classrooms. We would use the other days, later in the year, for grade-level partners to plan together and talk about how it's going."

"And use all the professional days on that? On the science kits?" asked Angie.

"Well, that's the idea we had," Marguerite replied, "to really focus the time on one thing that's worthwhile and important."

Catherine Stempel, a second-grade teacher, and Angie began speaking at once. They looked at each other, and Catherine gestured for Angie to go first. "Thanks," said Angie. "In my classroom, I'm really focused on getting students reading and writing and thinking about numbers and how they relate. We do some science, but it's not my number-one priority, and just because some people are involved in a special science project doesn't mean it's a priority for me."

"I understand your concern about reading and math," Leo started, "but, Marguerite, and Jeff O'Brien, and I have been working for years on this science stuff, and it's not some nice little project. It's meant to change the whole school eventually. Jack's been on board since he came last year, right, Jack?"

"You know I'm always supportive of teachers' efforts to improve their teaching and curriculum," replied Jack. "But this is a decision the whole group has to make."

"I agree with Angie," said Catherine. "You're talking about a huge commitment by all the teachers, and I really don't think that's the way I want us to spend all the professional time. I think we should put our money on our biggest priorities right now: reading and math. We've got to put first things first."

Leo leaned across the table toward the others. "All kids need to be literate in science, just as they do in reading and math. They are going to need to learn science to compete in the global marketplace, to eventually get jobs in science and technology. If we really want to be preparing kids for their futures, they have to be able to study science later on, and if they never have science now, they won't be able to do that."

There was a brief silence. Roberta Quindlen, another parent, responded slowly, "I'm thinking about what Catherine said. If kids can't read and write and do math, then I'm not sure they're going to be able

to study the science later on anyway. Seems to me we should spend our money on the basics. I think if you were to ask other parents, they would say the same thing.”

“Science *is* a basic,” Leo replied excitedly. “I think it’s really basic to any kid’s success in the future. Look, the fact of the matter is that some of our kids get a good understanding of science, and some of them don’t. It’s an equity issue. Some of our kids only get a good science background because of what they do at home with their parents. We’re not serving all kids well with our science curriculum the way it is.”

Catherine frowned in frustration. “What I’m saying about reading and math makes it an equity issue, too, and I think it’s a pretty important one. If kids can’t master the basics, they won’t be able to survive.” She paused, looking directly at Leo. “Now Leo, I’m not saying we shouldn’t teach science. I’m just saying we really need to look at our priorities.”

“Science has *got* to be a priority!” Leo pounded his fist on the table. “When exactly is it going to be a priority? If we keep waiting until we’re doing reading and math perfectly, we’ll never get to science. In some classrooms at Kennedy, and you all know this, science isn’t even taught at all.”

There was an uncomfortable silence around the table after Leo’s comments. Jack finally said, “Would anyone else like to comment or offer an opinion?”

“Marguerite, help me out here,” Leo looked at her beseechingly.

Marguerite paused. “I guess I’m not sure what to say. I’m really happy with what kids in my class are learning, and I’d like to see more people using the kits and the inquiry-based approach. But obviously this group doesn’t feel that’s a priority right now, and I don’t know that we can do anything about that. I guess we should hold off on expanding to the whole school until it’s a priority for everyone.”