CASE STUDY 7.2
Kate Sullivan

For a few minutes before school each morning, Kate Sullivan walked through the playground at North Hills Elementary School, talking with students and enjoying the youthful commotion. Her walks through the yard gave Kate the chance to mix with the students in a way that she still found reassuring after seventeen years as principal of the school. The walks also provided the students with a chance to talk to her about the issues in their young lives.

On this Monday morning early in spring, Kate’s gaze across the playground was arrested by a handful of fourth-grade boys playing an unfamiliar game in a corner of the yard. Kate watched for a minute, then walked briskly toward them, nodding acknowledgements to a score of greetings and tugs at her sleeves as she cut through to the boys.

The boys shouted their own greetings as Kate approached, making no attempt to hide the crack vials they were passing among themselves. Several of the boys also held $20 and $50 bills.

“Gentlemen,” Kate said, trying to catch the breath she had lost not from the dash across the playground but from the shock of her discovery. “What is this? I want these capsules. All of them. Where did you get these? Whose money is this?”

The boys only shuffled and collectively shrugged their shoulders. As she began to collect the vials, Kate realized with considerable relief that the vials were filled with chalk powder and that the boys had only been playing at being drug dealers. But the cash was real. A few questions more, and Kate traced the bills to the pockets of Miguel Aurillio, who had recently immigrated with his family from Mexico.

Kate instructed the boys to report to her office after school for a discussion about the seriousness of their game. She then took Miguel gently by the shoulder and steered him toward the building. “Miguel, you come with me. I want to discuss this large amount of money with your mother.”

Miguel’s command of English was superficial at best, and he knew to follow Kate more from her gesture than her words. Once through the hectic outer office and inside Kate’s cramped but organized inner office, Kate called Miguel’s home.

Miguel seemed to realize as she was on the telephone that Kate was calling his mother. Kate was not fluent in Spanish, but she had learned, out of obvious necessity, enough of the language to call parents to school confer-
ences. Her intermittent use of Spanish words was enough to render Miguel distinctly uncomfortable.

While they waited for someone from Miguel’s household to show up, the child fidgeted nervously in his chair. Kate offered him one of the several storybooks written in Spanish which she kept in her office, and she left him in order to attend to a few of the myriad details and minor complications that accompanied every new school day.

“¿Dónde está mi hijo?” Kate had been conferring with her secretary about morning announcements before picking up the microphone to lead the pledge, but she turned abruptly at the commotion created when a large, swarthy man burst through the outer office door, followed by two young men who resembled Miguel. The three men approached the two women, who were standing behind the counter that divided the employees’ working space from a waiting area.

“Are you Miguel’s father?” Kate asked quietly. The man clearly did not understand her; he barely seemed to hear her. He glanced around the room and, seeing the hinged gate in the counter, barged through toward Kate’s office. The men, whom Kate took to be Miguel’s brothers, followed.

“Louise, call Emilio and Barry,” called Kate over her shoulder as she followed Mr. Aurillio toward Miguel, referring to the school security guard and the chief custodian. She knew she would need some help translating, and she hoped she would not need help protecting Miguel.

Even though he had only been a few steps ahead of her, by the time Kate reached her office Mr. Aurillio had Miguel on his feet and was gripping him roughly by his shirt collar. “¿Qué diablo crees que estás haciendo? ¿Dónde está el dinero?” Miguel only looked terrified and glanced pleadingly toward the two other men, who assumed positions at the door.

Kate’s ignorance of Spanish was no handicap; the language of anger and retribution was universal. Kate had seen too many confrontations between parents and children, and she intervened immediately and without hesitation. Her gray hair and slight frame belied her determination to protect her students. She knew just how to buy time until Emilio and Barry arrived.

Purposefully, Kate stepped right up to Mr. Aurillio and the cowering Miguel, putting her face as close to the father’s as she could given the one-foot discrepancy in height. She placed her left hand gently atop the father’s hand, which was holding Miguel almost off the floor. Kate could not see what the two younger men were doing, but she hoped they were standing still.

“Put him down, Mr. Aurillio,” Kate commanded softly, but with all the authority she could muster. “Put him down. We will talk.” Mr. Aurillio seemed surprised that Kate would confront him so boldly, and he relaxed his grip more in response to this novelty than because he understood Kate’s command. The instant she felt his grip relax, she pushed Miguel back into the chair and stepped between father and son.
Then she smiled. “Would you sit down, Mr. Aurillio?” Kate indicated another chair with an outstretched hand. “Siéntese.” As she spoke, the school security guard, Emilio Sanchez, appeared at the door, and Kate breathed an inward sigh of relief.

“Hello, Emilio. Will you translate? First, introductions, please.” As Emilio began one of the many responsibilities he performed outside his formal job description, Miguel’s father sat down uncomfortably, and Kate moved to lean on the edge of her desk. She did not want any furniture separating her from this child.

The conversation that followed was a halting one, as Emilio translated between Kate, Mr. Aurillio, and Miguel, who held his chin against his chest and offered whispered, monosyllabic replies. The men in the doorway, whom introductions had established were indeed Miguel’s older brothers, did not say a word. It was apparent to Kate that everyone was now lying and that Mr. Aurillio, although perfectly aware of the source of Miguel’s wealth, was feigning ignorance. Finally, Kate asked Emilio to tell Mr. Aurillio that his son should not carry large sums of money in school, for the sake of order in the school and his own safety. Mr. Aurillio departed with a withering glance at his youngest son when Emilio escorted the three men out of the school.

Kate looked at Miguel with sympathy when they were alone. “¿Cómo te sientes?” She pulled a chair close to the child and touched his hand. He withdrew his hand reflexively and looked at the floor. After a quiet moment Kate stood and pulled Miguel to his feet with a gentle hand on his elbow. “Come, I’ll walk you to class.”

Kate returned from escorting Miguel and sat at her desk to complete the paperwork she had begun with Louise. From the window of her third-floor office, Kate had a clear view across the playground at North Hills and past the chain link fence that encircled it. Beyond the fence, looking south, Kate could scan the leaking rooftops and broken windows of the low-rise tenements of the neighborhoods that surrounded the school, built on the hills that gave the city its name. To the north, she could see down the city’s broad commercial avenues, the arteries of a once vigorous business district that over the last decade had been drained by drugs and violence and the intense poverty of the community’s disintegrating families.

At her desk every morning by seven o’clock, Kate often watched the prostitutes and drug dealers end their night’s work only a half hour or so before the first school buses began rolling down the avenues on their way to her school. Against this inner-city backdrop, Kate and ninety other teachers, administrators, and support staff worked to teach 1300 children how to read and write and add and subtract, and how to defend themselves against the despair, neglect, and violence that broke like a wave at the doors of their homes and school.

The slow decline of North Hills began in the early 1970s, when a massive cooperative housing development designed to provide home ownership for
middle-class families opened in a nearby suburb. The development drained North Hills of its middle class. In its place came a steady influx of immigrants from the Caribbean islands, Asia, and Eastern and Central Europe, fleeing poverty, natural disasters, or dictatorship. The new families, many with five or six children, placed enormous new demands on the city and its schools over the decade that followed. Many went on public assistance. Homes and apartments were subdivided and subdivided again to provide space in the crunch for cheap housing. North Hills’s enrollment swelled to 500 over its design capacity. Nearly a quarter of the students in North Hills entered kindergarten speaking little English. Most of their parents spoke even less.

In the early 1980s, a public hospital opened a block from the school, attracting the city’s poorest health-care clients and hastening the middle-class exodus. But the most devastating blow to North Hills came only a few years ago, when crack appeared on the streets. The crack epidemic finalized the middle-class flight from North Hills and helped to complete the city’s transformation: North Hills was now 50 percent Hispanic, 20 percent black, 20 percent Asian, and 10 percent white.

Many businesses and industries followed the middle class out as the neighborhood deteriorated, taking jobs and tax revenues to the suburbs. Although state aid was increased to help the school district compensate for the loss of commercial tax revenues, the increase was never enough. The school districts in the wealthy suburban towns near North Hills were spending an average of $14,000 a year educating each pupil; in North Hills the expenditure per pupil was less than half that sum.

As a result, its teachers had become among the area’s lowest-paid and worked in some of its most crowded classrooms. Most textbooks were ten or fifteen years old. Broken windows and leaking ceilings often took months to repair. The school’s interior had gone eighteen years without paint.

A less visible but more ominous result of the poverty, and the one at the front of Kate’s mind once she resolutely shed her thoughts of Miguel, was that both attendance rates and standardized test results had dropped significantly over the last several years. Kate had received the results of the most recent state standardized tests for elementary schools only two weeks ago. They showed that the steady decline in the North Hills’s scores was continuing. In just over a decade, the scores had dropped from the top quarter to the bottom tenth of elementary schools in the state in nearly every category. Fewer than a third of North Hills’s students were reading at grade level.

Kate withdrew her eyes and attention from the depressing cityscape below her window and turned to the business of running her school. Impatient with paperwork, she rose to make one of her several daily laps around the hallways before stopping in, casually, to observe a new teacher and then returning to finalize her thoughts about attendance rates and test scores in preparation for her meeting late that afternoon. Peter Warren, the North Hills school superintendent and Kate’s boss, had received a request soon
after the release of the damning state scores, suggesting a meeting between Peter, Kate, and officials from the state education department. Years of experience had taught her to be well prepared with facts and figures for any conversation with those bureaucrats.

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After leading Nason Burns, the state education department’s deputy commissioner for instruction, on a half-hour tour of the school, Peter Warren and Kate ushered him into Kate’s spartan office. Each took a seat around Kate’s desk, Nason settling where frightened Miguel had cowered a few hours earlier. He opened a briefcase and removed computer printouts of the test scores and attendance records. Kate leaned across her desk to flick on a countertop coffee machine. Nason was the first to speak.

“I think I have a good understanding of what you’re trying to cope with here,” Nason said, shifting his glance from Peter to Kate. “Your staff seems to be responding admirably against tremendous odds.”

Kate’s smile masked her skepticism; she had heard flattering remarks before. “Thank you, Nason. I am proud of my people. What questions do you have, now that you’ve seen our school?”

Nason leaned back in his chair. “Well, I am curious about a few things I saw. For example, I know that we gave you a special exemption so that you could convert your library and gymnasium to classroom space, but I think we still require some type of physical education and library programs.”

“We’re complying, of course, Nason,” Kate said. “We’ve kept on a physed teacher, who leads stretching and calisthenics over the public address system for ten minutes each morning. He held gym classes in the courtyard in warmer weather until two years ago, when we needed the space to build the eleven portable classrooms that you saw on our tour. Now we hold physed in the cafeteria, when it’s not taken by one of our six lunch sessions. And we have a rolling library, on carts, that visits each of our classrooms at least once a week.”

Kate paused for a moment, then added, “But I think your question leads us to an excellent place to start our discussion—the issue of overcrowding. It’s our most serious problem now. It is the root of a lot of our problems. A formula for failure.”

Peter, as if on cue, opened a folder in his lap and leaned forward in his chair toward the deputy commissioner. “Here’s a state policy regulation that we are violating. The cap for early childhood classes, K–3, is twenty-eight children. We’ve had as many as thirty-seven in a K–3 class. Here’s another reg we come close to violating: We can’t have regular classes meet in the halls. We don’t, but several special programs do meet in the halls. The ESL program meets at the east end of the fourth-floor corridor. One of our remedial reading programs meets at the west end.”
That might help to explain some of these scores,” Nason said, holding up a stack of printouts.

“Indeed, I think it does,” Peter said. “It also might help you to understand why attendance is dropping so steadily here. And it’s not just the remedial kids who are suffering because of what’s happening to this school, to this city. You saw what had been our gym. Now, it’s four third-grade classrooms, separated from each other by file cabinets and blackboards and the will of our teachers.”

Kate picked up the day’s attendance sheets from her desk. “One hundred and twenty third-graders were in the classes in the gym today, Nason,” she said. “Could you even hear yourself think above the din when you walked through it? And it’s getting worse! Since the school year began we’ve enrolled forty-four students, half of them from overseas—from Haiti, Vietnam, Liberia, Lebanon, Russia. Wherever there is a problem in the world—a hurricane, an earthquake, a war, a coup d’état—families leave and end up here. When they come, they bring their problems: poverty, transience, family violence, chaotic home life.”

“Tell me about the families, the parents,” Nason interjected. “What are you doing to work with them?”

“We have two types of parents at North Hills, Nason. We have parents who truly love their children and want the best for them. Unfortunately, many of them can’t work with us. Sometimes it’s because both mother and father work long hours, as secretaries, clerks, drivers, hospital orderlies, city employees. Sometimes it’s because it’s just a mother at home who’s got five or six kids and feels overwhelmed. Sometimes it’s because neither parent speaks English.”

Kate rose to pour some coffee as she continued; she didn’t need her notes to recite the grim facts of her school and her life. “Here are some more statistics for you, Nason. Seventy percent of our students were born outside the United States, or were born to parents who were. One in five of our students is in ESL or bilingual classes. And 90 percent of our students are eligible for a free or reduced-cost lunch.”

“You mentioned two types of parents,” Nason interrupted. “What’s the second?”

“Parents who are indifferent, or who continually work against us.”

“What do you mean?”

Kate did not have to reach far back in her memory to illustrate her point. “Here’s an example,” she replied. “Miguel Aurillio is one of our most troubled students, a symbol of all in this school and community that is failing these children. He’s on my mind because he was in this office just this morning. Often Miguel comes to school without having eaten and too late to receive the free breakfast he is entitled to. I worry that the federally subsidized lunch he receives here—the slabs of stale ham and surplus cheese between two slices of crust, with ketchup as his vegetable—is his
most solid meal of the day. His teacher tells me that he comes to class every
day without his homework or even a pencil or notebook, but with his pock-
ets stuffed with gum and candy. I don’t think he owns a winter jacket. And
today I discovered that his father has him somehow involved with his co-
caine business.”

“What are you doing about that?” Nason asked.

“Worrying,” Kate answered bluntly. “I have no proof—just a frightened
little boy, an angry, almost violent father, and large-denomination bills in the
hands of a 10-year-old.”

“Well, how do you handle children from these problem homes in gen-
eral?” Nason persisted. Kate could not prevent a private thought that this
“expert” from upstate wasn’t one.

“Nason, we try to teach them to read and write.” Kate knew that the weari-
ess of her day was reflected in her tone. “And while we do that, we work on
their anger and, most especially, their self-esteem. These children are dam-
aged by failure and by their home situations. They don’t see themselves as
learners and they don’t see the point in becoming educated. We begin with a
student like Miguel by being accepting, nurturing, and patient, and we go
from there. We also try to keep our eyes open and to protect them.

“So, for $25,000 a year, teachers here have to be psychologists, social
workers, and even substitute parents. The role of this school and its teachers
has had to evolve as the community has changed. A lot of the responsibilities
of the parents have been passed onto us. In the meantime, teachers start at
$30,000 a year just half an hour north of here, in Raddison—a lovely, wealthy
suburb.” Kate ignored Peter’s warning frown; she knew he thought she was
overdoing it. But she didn’t miss a beat: “We rarely have our pick of the best
teachers, but still we have a staff I’m proud of.”

“I admire your loyalty to them,” Nason said. “But you know you’re not
alone in this. We have increased state aid to this district beyond what our for-
mulas normally permit. And as for your teachers, I think you know that the
federal government designated North Hills as a district where new teachers
get a portion of their student loans forgiven for every year they teach here.”

“Of course I know that, and we are grateful for it,” Kate said. “And I
know that we have a governor and a legislature that dole out special grants
to impoverished schools piecemeal, yet refuse to make fundamental changes
in the way education is funded so that we can eliminate the inequities be-
tween districts like North Hills and Raddison.” Kate saw peripherally that
Peter was really uncomfortable now.

Nason, too, seemed frustrated. He shifted in his chair and looked point-
edly at his watch. “Mrs. Sullivan, our dialogue has to be more constructive if
we are to help you in what you’re trying to do here. I’m concerned that your
focus is too much on the problems facing North Hills and too little on the
programs in place to deal with them. I want to know how you intend to get
these test scores up and deal with this atrocious attendance.”
Kate looked at Peter with an openly incredulous gaze, as if to say, “This idiot hasn’t heard a word I have said.” To Nason, she replied tersely, “What sort of program might you suggest, Mr. Burns?”

“I have another appointment in thirty minutes,” Nason said. “Obviously we need to talk a good deal more, particularly about exactly how you’re dealing with the issues we discussed today. But before we meet again, I’d like a report from you outlining exactly that—how you’re attempting to cope. Specifically, I want to know how your classroom teachers are dealing with all this—the overcrowding, the poverty, the language barriers.” Nason snapped shut his briefcase, computer printouts safely inside, and reached for his suit jacket as he spoke. Suddenly, Kate felt like weeping as she realized that once again her paperwork had been increased, and the assistance she desperately needed was nonexistent. But seventeen years of experience had taught her to behave with dignity and control.

“Certainly, Nason. We are responding actively to the environment here, but I felt strongly that you could not appreciate our priorities until you were fully informed of our problems. When would you like this report?” Peter Warren seemed to relax as Kate resumed her bureaucratic facade.

“Is a month unreasonable?” Nason, too, seemed relieved to be back on comfortable ground rather than conversing about violence, drugs, and ketchup.

“Fine,” Kate smiled as she held out her hand. She realized that one more month would put them within four weeks of summer recess, and that the report, and her requests for resources, would find a safe haven in a filing cabinet.

Nason and Peter left together for their car. Kate knew that Nason hadn’t wanted to drive alone through the school’s neighborhood and so had met Peter at district headquarters. Kate heard laughter and shuffling as she stood in the outer office and suddenly remembered the boys who had been pretending to deal drugs this morning. They were waiting in the hallway to meet with her. As she ushered them into her office, she looked out her window to the playground below and city beyond. The afternoon was turning overcast and gray; a slight drizzle had begun to fall. Kate looked down to the concrete play yard and saw Miguel, sitting alone on a broken bench.