

## CASE STUDY 9.1

### Allison Cohen

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No one was sure when the teachers at the Bidwell Elementary School in the Lumberton school district began to refer to themselves as “the old biddies,” but the name had stuck, and a short time after Allison Cohen began teaching in the new resource room in Bidwell, she came to the conclusion that the name was appropriate.

The Lumberton school district, located in a suburban area of a large northeastern state, was created many years ago by merging the school districts of seven neighboring townships for purposes of improving the school services they could offer to the children residing in the townships. Currently serving almost 11,000 children in kindergarten through grade 12 with sixteen elementary schools, four middle schools, and three high schools, Lumberton employed 1200 teachers and staff and 60 school administrators.

Bidwell School was different from all the other elementary schools in Lumberton in a number of ways. First, it was the smallest school in the district. There were only two classes at each grade level, with a total of thirteen teachers in the building. (One kindergarten teacher taught both the morning and the afternoon kindergarten sessions.) Because of its size, there had been no full-time special teachers at the school. Art, music, physical education, remedial reading, and computer teachers visited the school weekly, but the regular staff consisted of only the thirteen classroom teachers and the principal.

All thirteen teachers were women, and all had been there for a long time. The “newest” teacher, Theresa Conti, began teaching there fourteen years ago. Mary Edgerly, the principal, had been a Bidwell teacher for twenty-two years prior to her appointment to the principal’s position four years ago. The current staff averaged twenty-one years of service at the school, with Margaret Antonelli holding the longevity record—thirty-three years of consecutive teaching at Bidwell.

The teachers’ years together and their ability to work as a team accounted for another difference at Bidwell. The teachers were very powerful. For example, there had never been a special education classroom in the building. Over the years, Bidwell principals had successfully argued that it made more sense to bus the few special education students from Bidwell to a neighboring school than to bus many special education students to Bidwell’s small setting.

The teachers’ power was also seen in the fact that in the past fourteen years none of Bidwell’s teachers had been transferred to another school in the district. Bidwell was the only school in Lumberton that had not had re-

cent staff changes. The teachers remained exempt from staff shifts even when Bidwell's enrollment declined in the early 1980s and some classes fell to fewer than fifteen students. Recently, school enrollments had increased, and there were now between twenty-two and twenty-five students in each class.

Some people in the district attributed the power of the Bidwell faculty to Margaret Antonelli. Her family had lived in Lumberton for years, and she was said to be "connected" to local politicians and other powerful people in the community. Margaret, who had never married, still lived in the house where she had been raised. Until recently, she had cared for her aging mother, who died this past spring.

There were other people on the Bidwell faculty with strong connections in the community. The principal was the sister-in-law of the superintendent of schools, and two of the teachers were related to members of the school board. A fourth teacher was married to the scion of one of the wealthiest families in the community.

The most recent challenge to the status quo at Bidwell occurred two years ago when Ruth Greenburg, the director of special education, tried to start a resource room in the building as part of a pilot mainstreaming program. Until then, all mildly handicapped elementary school students in the district had been served in self-contained special education classrooms. When Ruth Greenburg was promoted to the position of director of special education, she initiated resource room programs in the district. At first, as the services to mildly handicapped elementary school students in Lumberton began to change, Mary Edgerly was able to argue successfully that Bidwell was unprepared to test a new program since the teachers had no experience with special education students. But even as Mary won that battle, she knew that a resource room would soon come to her building. Ruth Greenburg had been responsible for changing the special education program in such a way that district policy now called for a resource room in each elementary building. For two years, Ruth had held in-service meetings for all elementary school teachers to prepare them for mainstreaming.

As Mary had anticipated, two years later the resource room became a reality, and Allison Cohen was the teacher assigned to the class. When Allison arrived at Bidwell, she knew little of its history. She had been hired to teach in Lumberton immediately after she graduated from the state university with a B.S. in elementary and special education. Two years before, after teaching in a self-contained LD classroom for five years, she was asked to move to a resource room as part of the pilot program the district was establishing to mainstream many of its special education students. She found the resource room program stimulating, and she knew that her classroom was seen as a model by other teachers. She also knew from attending meetings with other resource room teachers that her relationships with the teachers in her building were better than most.

Now 28, she was married and had a 3-year-old child. A bright, feisty red-head who managed to balance her work and home life with humor and high spirits, she knew that Ruth Greenburg had selected her for this assignment because of her upbeat personality and success in her first resource room assignment. Other than that, she got little information from Ruth about the Bidwell situation.

When school started in September, she found eleven children on her class roll. These were all former Bidwell School students who had been served in special education classes in other elementary schools and who were being returned to Bidwell to enter their assigned grade and receive resource room support. These students had been selected by the Committee on Special Education (CSE) as the most likely to be successfully mainstreamed from among all the children in self-contained classes whose home school was Bidwell. It was expected that Allison's class would be completed as other Bidwell students were returned to their home school and as newly eligible students were scheduled for the resource room instead of being sent to a self-contained class in another school.

Allison began the school year by meeting personally with each of the seven teachers who had a resource room student and talking about the role that she and the resource room might play in helping both the child and the teacher. The teachers were very gracious and listened to Allison with interest. They didn't seem to have any questions or objections, and Allison told her husband that she felt that they probably were going to serve the returning students well, given their years of experience.

But on the second day of school, June Jamison, one of the third-grade teachers, came to Allison to request additional resource room time for Seth, the mainstreamed student in her classroom. As Allison tried to explain that Seth was expected to spend most of his day in the regular class, June nodded and with a smile said, "Yes, dear, and you are quite right to try to follow policy. But don't you think your first responsibility is to the child? Seth so needs your help."

Allison agreed to bring Seth to the resource room for an additional half hour each day and told June that she would check with her at the end of the week to see how Seth was doing. June responded, "I'll be happy to talk with you then."

The following day, Anna Richards, the other third-grade teacher, came to see Allison. "As you know," she began, "I have two resource room students in my class. Third grade is a very difficult year, and neither of these children is able to keep up with the class. They seem very discouraged, and I'm worried about them."

Allison responded, "Perhaps I could observe the children in your class and see how they are doing."

"Oh, no. I'm sure that would upset them. I think they need your help in your classroom." Allison noticed that Anna emphasized "your classroom."

When Allison said she would see the two children for an additional half hour each day, Anna responded, “Half an hour! That won’t be long enough. These students need help in reading, arithmetic, and spelling. I was thinking of two more hours a day.”

Allison tried to reason with the teacher. “Miss Richards, the whole idea of mainstreaming is for the children to be with other third-graders in your classroom. I really shouldn’t see them for two more hours a day.”

The two teachers finally agreed that the students would spend an additional hour a day in the resource room. As Anna left the classroom, Allison felt that the worst was over, since third-grade teachers throughout the district were the most concerned about mainstreaming as a result of a recently instituted state Minimum Basic Skills Test, which was given in third, seventh, and eleventh grades.

She couldn’t have been more wrong. By the end of the second week of school, she had been visited by four more teachers, each of whom came to request more time in the resource room for her mainstreamed students. Without showing anger or impatience, they all told Allison virtually the same story: The students needed more help than they could give; therefore Allison would have to do something.

Allison decided to try to work with the teachers by suggesting the sort of simple classroom accommodations that had helped the teachers in her previous school. When June told her that Seth could not follow oral directions, Allison suggested that June write the directions on the chalkboard.

June responded, “Well, of course I’ve tried that, but it just did not help a bit. You know, my dear, you have only five children at a time. Until you’ve had experience with large groups of children, you really can’t imagine what might work in a classroom like mine.”

Allison then tried to observe her students in their regular classes. She first approached Margaret Antonelli, figuring that if she could win her over, the rest of the faculty would be pushovers.

“Miss Antonelli.” Allison tried to be winning. “Jeff has said the nicest things about your classroom. Since other students are having some problems, I’d like to watch him for a while in your room to see if I can figure out what special things you are doing.”

Margaret looked at Allison without smiling. “I really don’t think that’s a good idea. It would make Jeff and the other children uncomfortable for you to be there.”

Another time, Allison had to blink back tears of frustration when a teacher responded to her suggestion that she visit the teacher’s classroom by saying, “Perhaps you could run some copies of my worksheets or correct some student work if you are looking for things to do.”

And if she went into a classroom without an invitation, the teacher would stop the lesson, speak politely with Allison, and not resume the lesson until Allison left the room.

When Allison tried to discuss the problem with Mary Edgerly, the principal spoke with her in an even tone. “I think you should know that the teachers at Bidwell are the best in the district. I’m sure that every decision they make is in the best interest of the pupils.” Allison explained that she respected the teachers but that they were fighting her efforts to mainstream the students. Mary seemed annoyed and responded, “When you have had as much experience with children as these teachers, then you’ll understand.”

Allison found herself showing her frustration. “But the resource room isn’t working!” she told Mary in a louder-than-usual tone.

Mary seemed to sense her distress and responded, “The teachers are very happy with the resource room. The children are getting along well, considering, and I think you should just keep on helping them. If that means spending more time with them in the resource room, then you should do that without getting all upset.”

Mary ended the conversation by putting her arm around Allison’s shoulder and saying, “In fact, I just saw Ruth Greenburg at a meeting and told her what a wonderful job you are doing. I told Ruth I owed her an apology for resisting the resource room, since it’s working out better than I could have imagined. And I made it clear that you are the reason we are so happy with the program. I really think you just need to have a little more confidence in yourself.”

“Talk about damning with faint praise,” Allison thought to herself. She knew that the resource room was not working and that she was not doing her job. She still had only eleven children in her class, and she was seeing each child for at least three hours a day. She was not working with the teachers, and most of her time in the resource room was spent teaching developmental reading, language arts, and math, since the students were missing instruction in those areas by being in the resource room instead of their regular classrooms.

Allison felt that the Bidwell teachers had entered into a conspiracy against her while maintaining a surface cordiality and friendliness. The first time she mentioned that feeling to her husband, he laughed and said, “Those old biddies in a conspiracy? Allie, you’ve got to be kidding.”

But Allison wasn’t kidding. She really had come to think of the Bidwell teachers as evil. She no longer believed that it was a coincidence that their responses to her and the children were so alike. She was convinced that they were trying to prevent the resource room from succeeding.

Beyond that, she felt that Mary had finessed her by lavishly complimenting her to Ruth Greenburg. If she went to Ruth with her problems, Ruth would probably think she was crazy. There was no one in the building with whom she could talk. She needed an ally who knew what it was *really* like in that school and who could give her advice. She did not know where to turn.