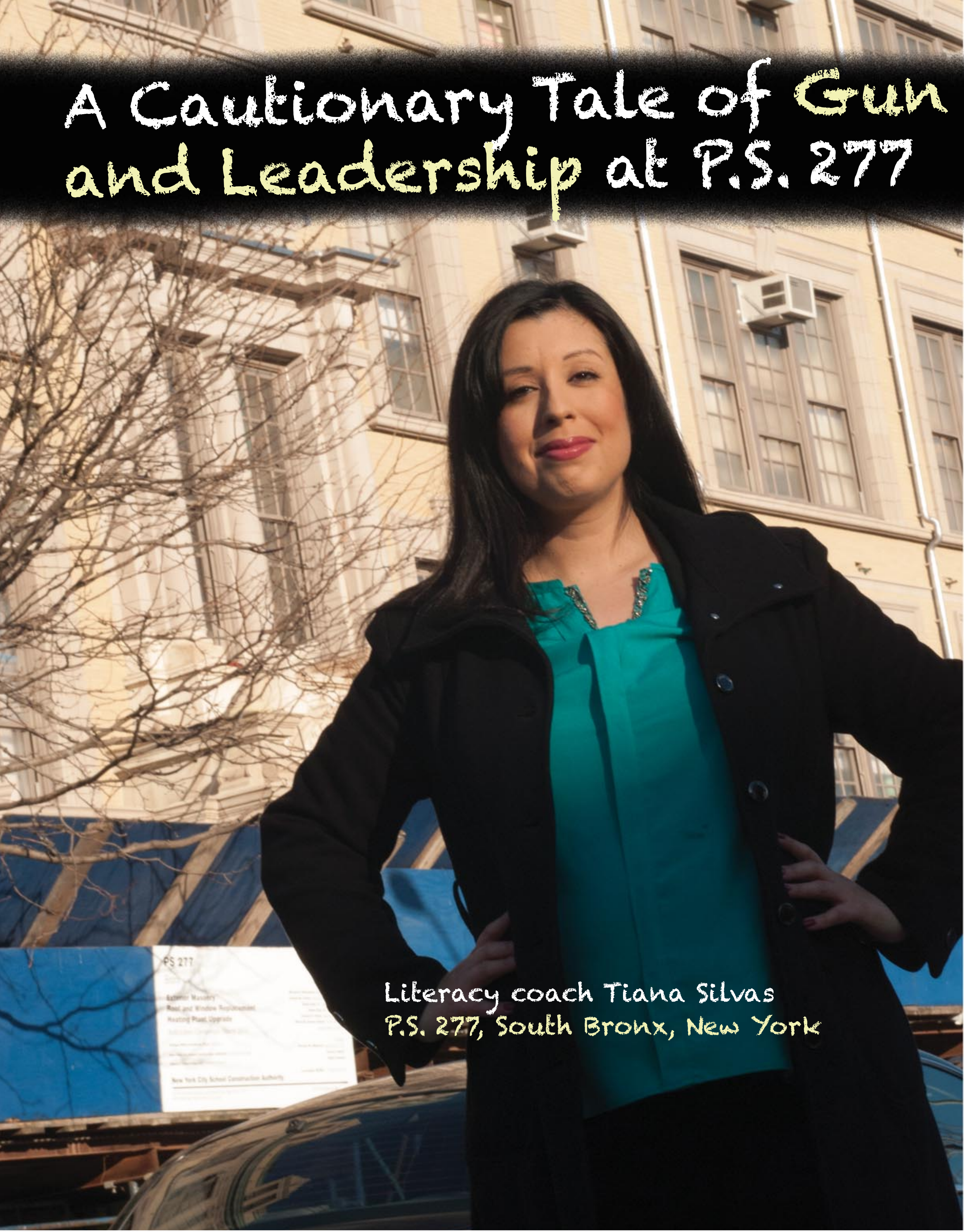
A Cautionary Tale of Gun and Leadership at P.S. 277


PS 277
New York City School Construction Authority

Literacy coach Tiana Silvas
P.S. 277, South Bronx, New York

Violence, Test Scores,

BY DAN FEIGELSON

What does educational leadership look like in the age of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)? The CCSS have pushed districts across the country to think deeply about rigorous content. As many states adopt teacher evaluation systems based on rubrics such as Charlotte Danielson's,[1] there is a welcome focus on good pedagogy. But in the midst of these important reforms, one piece of the triangle is often overlooked. Amid the slings and arrows of outrageous politics, the true leaders are teachers and administrators who believe the needs and stories of individual children are what matter most.

Public School 277 is a South Bronx elementary school in the poorest congressional district of the United States. The hundred-year-old building is frequently covered in scaffolding due to its crumbling walls, and Internet and phone service go out regularly. Many students have siblings or parents who are gang members. The 600,000 people living in this section of the Bronx make up one of the largest racially segregated concentrations of poor people in the nation. Though it is only a five-minute subway ride to Manhattan, many students have never been there. With some of the lowest standardized test scores in the system, P.S. 277 is perennially "on the radar" with both the state and the city.

Naima began fifth grade at 277 in September of 2010. It was her third elementary school. From the beginning, she was the odd girl out. Taller than the other kids as a result of being held over, she kept her distance from classmates and maintained a "tough girl" front. Naima often refused to complete her work. She did her best to distract others and was defiant with adults. "We had no idea who she was or what her story was," recalled Tiana Silvas, the school's literacy coach. A few weeks into the year, however, it became apparent that this student was in fact trying to send a message.

One day when Naima refused to go to music class, her teacher, Caitlin Mahoney, called Tiana for help. "Caitlin mentioned that Naima had some laminated newspaper articles in her backpack, and kept pulling them out to read them," the coach explained. "I asked if she'd be willing to share them with the class." After a few seconds of wary silence, the girl responded by silently pushing her articles across the table. In bold letters, the headlines read "Teen Shot." Ms. Mahoney and Ms. Silvas realized what Naima had been trying to tell them all along. Three months before, her 16-year-old cousin had been killed at a birthday party. "We knew then that we had a responsibility to help her," commented Ms. Mahoney. Naima agreed to share her story with the class.

When her classmates returned from music, Naima sat in a chair at the front of the room, ready to share. The other fifth graders gathered in the meeting area, not exactly sure what was going on. After getting out only a few words, Naima's voice cracked and she threw her hands in front of her face. Silence. Tiana asked the students how many of them also had a friend or family member who had been killed in the neighborhood. More than half of the hands in the class went up.

"We decided then that it wasn't just Naima who needed to deal with this," Tiana explained. "We read the article about her cousin aloud, which was a dicey proposition—it was pretty graphic—but how could we not?" The class began buzzing with personal stories, questions, and emotion. After a few minutes of conversation, the teachers sent the students to their writer's notebooks to record their ideas.

When Caitlin collected the notebooks, she discovered they were filled with questions—and that many students were wondering similar things. "It was a moment of truth," she reflected. "Here we were, a struggling school needing to get the test scores up. But it felt irresponsible to let this moment pass."

It was in fact a moment of reckoning. With both state and city breathing down the school's neck, putting the curriculum on hold was a risky move. But teacher leaders do what is necessary for their students, regardless of consequences.

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The two teachers pored through each notebook entry, synthesizing the student's responses. They came up with three guiding questions:

- How do people get guns?
- Why do people own guns?
- Why do people misuse firearms?

The class began an inquiry study on gun violence and its causes. What followed was the most rigorous research the fifth graders had ever done. Seeking answers to their burning questions, these nine-, ten-, and eleven-year-olds read through sections of the Constitution and Bill of Rights. They analyzed crime and poverty statistics in the different boroughs and precincts of New York City, looking at population density in different high-crime neighborhoods. They read articles

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and personal narratives, interviewed criminal defense lawyers, watched Internet news videos. "Our main role as teachers," Tiana recounted, "was to teach them strategies for negotiating complex texts. But mostly they figured it out for themselves. They wanted to know the answers so badly. I remember Brandon combing through a really difficult article, and coming upon this one part where he realized guns were actually legal. He couldn't believe it. That started a whole new line of research in the class, about how criminals get their guns from legal owners." After weeks of study, the students put together a fundraiser and gave money to the Brady Gun Control Campaign, in the name of Naima's cousin.

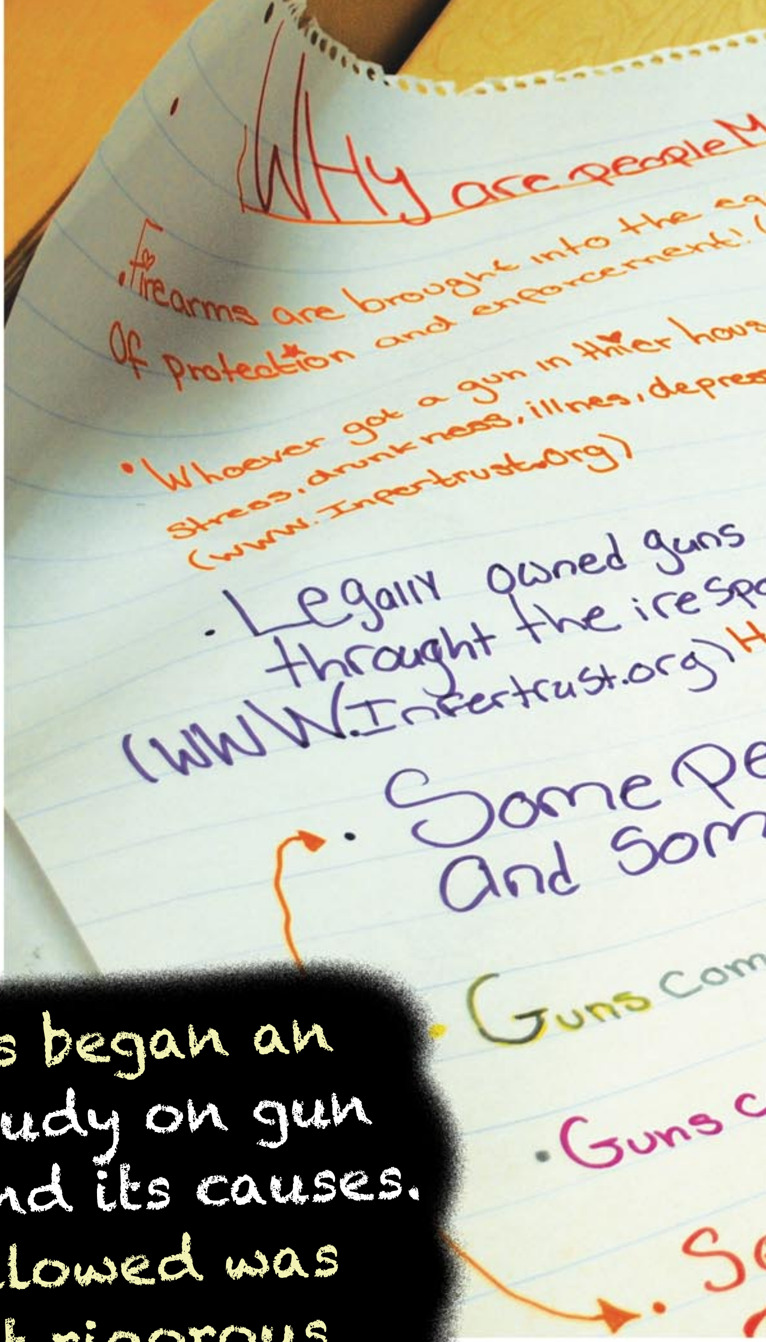
Caitlin and Tiana were not the only leaders in this scenario. Despite pressure from district and state officials to adopt a more uniform curriculum, Principal Cheryl Tyler had fought hard to maintain an inquiry approach at 277. "Our work is to explicitly teach our children that it is not enough for them to answer the questions of others," she wrote. "They must be the ones asking the questions, doing the research, and pushing back when the answers don't make sense." Other classes had researched issues such as racism (Does it exist today?) and gender stereotypes in books and media. Prior to Ms. Tyler's taking over, attendance numbers were dismal; children felt no connection between what they were studying in class and their lives outside. By 2010, many cried before Christmas vacation because they could not come to school that week.

At the same time the fifth graders were learning about gun violence, P.S. 277 was entering another sort of battle. That October, they were identified as an "Early Public Engagement" site—Department of Ed shorthand for a school that may be closed down due to poor test scores.

It was a demoralizing moment. After the initial shock, Principal Tylee addressed her staff and called on them to speak out. The teachers of P.S. 277 rose to the occasion, enlisting parents and elected officials to lobby on their behalf. Staff, community members, and families spoke out at public hearings. Parents and teachers sent copious emails to department officials about the difference the school had made in children's lives. Principal Tyler succeeded in getting significant media coverage—*The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal*, and NPR all did features on this "oasis in the South Bronx."

The hard work paid off. With so many members of the community stepping up, the New York City Department of Education was forced to take notice. P.S. 277 was narrowly granted a reprieve.

Test results did not increase that year. In fact, New York State designated 277 a priority school. State reviews followed in which evaluators made comments such as "You can't do that sort of teaching with *these* kids." Nonetheless, the teachers and their principal continued their inquiry work, complementing it with an increased focus on nonfiction reading and writing.



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Fast-forward two years. Though Cheryl Tyler had retired, new principal Lila Jorge continued to prioritize instruction based on the interests and questions of her inner-city students. Sticking to this approach, the school's Progress Report went up from an F in 2010–2011 to a C the following year—with particular progress among the school's lowest third. By 2012–2013, the school's state English Language Arts scores had gone up even further, and their grade had risen to a B. The state determined that P.S. 277 was no longer a priority school.

It had been clear to anyone who witnessed the gun study in Naima's class that the teacher leaders and principal of P.S. 277 were doing the right thing. The children had never been more engaged, never done more rigorous work. Moreover, in a neighborhood where school had always seemed irrelevant, kids began to see their classroom as a place

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of possibility. Research indicates that major shifts in educational practice are initially followed by a dip in test scores. Though it has taken time, the numbers are starting to catch up to the work. Scores at 277 are finally beginning to improve.

In the name of urgency, politicians, school districts, and high-level administrators have instituted high-stakes accountability measures across the country. These usually involve looking at student progress and performance on standardized tests from one year to the next. When scores do not go up, the jobs of principals and teachers are on the line, resulting in a climate of fear and mistrust. Prioritizing the stories of individual children and communities in such an environment can be dangerous.

Leaders know that to make a difference, one must take the long view. Leaders know that urgency is no excuse for shoddy change.

1. Danielson, Charlotte. 2007. *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*, 2d ed. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Dan Feigelson has worked extensively in New York City schools as a principal, teacher, staff developer, curriculum writer, and local superintendent, and is currently a network leader overseeing 30 elementary and middle schools (including P.S. 277). An early member of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, Dan has been featured in instructional videos and web materials and led institutes, workshops and lab-sites around the country on the teaching of reading and writing. A regular presenter at national conferences, Dan is also the author of *Practical Punctuation: Lessons In Rule Making and Rule Breaking in Elementary Writing* (available as a Heinemann eBook) and is at work on a new book about individual reading conferences, scheduled for publication in 2014.

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