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Elusive Story: The *Chicago Tribune* Examines "No Child Left Behind"

In the fall of 2003, *Chicago Tribune* education reporter Stephanie Banchero decided to take a fresh look at the effects of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The law was relatively new and had promised to revolutionize education, especially for poor people living in districts with failing schools. A key piece of the legislation was the so-called "choice provision," which allowed students in failing schools to transfer to better ones, with state governments providing the necessary transportation. Banchero was curious: What exactly was the experience of a child who took advantage of this opportunity?

Banchero was an old hand at reporting on education, and had written numerous stories on the public policy choices and trade-offs embedded in NCLB. But she was less experienced in long-form, human interest journalism. She set herself an ambitious professional goal when she decided that the best way to answer her question was to track one transfer student for an entire school year. Banchero quickly located a child who met her criterion: a reasonably strong student who would likely benefit from a better learning environment. Third-grader Rayola Carwell also satisfied Banchero's goal of finding a child with an involved parent. Yolanda Carwell, an African-American unmarried mother of three, spoke impressively about her commitment to improved opportunities for her children. Banchero started to follow Rayola as she enrolled in a new school, Stockton Elementary, on the North Side of Chicago.

This assignment not only presented a new reporting style for Banchero; it also put her in unfamiliar territory in the newsroom. To Banchero's disappointment, her editor had been tepid to the idea. The reporter, however, believed that she was on to something important. So taking an unusual step, Banchero decided to report it in the early mornings so it wouldn't interfere with her daily beat coverage. She worked on that schedule until January 2004, when Banchero's editors—acknowledging her tenacity—assigned her story to the paper's Projects Team.

By February, however, Banchero began to wonder whether maybe her original editors had been right to have been noncommittal. The story was not playing out as Banchero had hoped. Instead of an article about the policy consequences of NCLB, Banchero had amassed a tangle of

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material about an earnest child eager to learn, but hamstrung by her mother's own struggles. There was a policy angle: Had the state provided the transportation NCLB mandated, Rayola might well have succeeded. But her failure—by mid-year, she had left the Stockton school—had many causes besides shortcomings in the legislation. Among them was Yolanda Carwell's inability to keep a job or establish a routine for her children. The story, her editors told Banchero, was not whether NCLB worked or not, but how family environment mattered as much as legislation to a child's success in school. The story was as much about Yolanda as Rayola.

This put Banchero in a quandary. Like all effective journalists, she had worked hard to win the trust of her subjects. In the months Banchero had spent with the Carwells, the family had grown comfortable and unguarded in the reporter's presence. This now posed a problem. Did Carwell still understand—as she had at first—that the comments she had made over months of conversations could be used in the article? Although Banchero had told Carwell that she, in addition to her daughter, would be featured in the story, she wanted to be sure Carwell had understood how central a character she was becoming.

Banchero also wanted Carwell to know that her background would be subject to rigorous investigation and fact checking—and that the story might not be a favorable one. Indeed, Banchero herself had not anticipated the story's focus shifting in this way. Banchero felt a keen responsibility to her source—in this case a poorly educated, disadvantaged single mother. But she also wanted to finish reporting what she and her editors considered an important and valuable story. Banchero had intended to follow Rayola to the end of the school year. If she told Carwell what she intended to write, might Carwell block Banchero's continued access to her daughter?

No Child Left Behind

President George W. Bush signed the law intended to help children like Rayola Carwell on January 8, 2002. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was technically the latest reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). But by 2001, there was bipartisan consensus that too many children were able to graduate from high school without the skills necessary to compete in the 21st century. NCLB broke new ground with its insistence that any state which accepted federal funding for education test children in public schools on their mastery of reading and math. The law, as President Bush put it, took aim at "the soft bigotry of low expectations."[1]

Every school had to make measurable yearly progress in meeting its state's reading and math standards, or face sanctions. Students would be tested annually from third through eighth grades, and at least once in high school to ensure that they were learning the basics. School results would be made public, thereby holding schools accountable to parents and the communities they

[1] As quoted in "Education Reform Left Behind," *New York Times*, February 8, 2003.

served. If a school failed to improve, it would be given additional funding for individual tutoring and other measures to boost students' performance. If, after two years, a school failed to improve scores, its students could transfer to a better school; after three years, if no transfer was possible, students were entitled to free after-school tutoring. After four years of flat or declining test scores, the government could force a school to make significant changes, including firing underperforming teachers.

However, because education was a state right, not a federal one, the law did not establish national performance standards nor even a national test. Rather, each state was left to create its own standards and tests. Until states could meet the 2005 deadline for creating new guidelines and tests, they were expected to rely on existing standardized tests to determine which schools needed to improve.

Choice. In a part of the new law known as the "choice provision," NCLB also gave parents greater say in their children's education. Parents of any child enrolled in a school that failed to meet state standards for two consecutive years could transfer the child to a better public school in the district, which would have to provide transportation. Children in dangerous or violent schools were given the option of moving to a safer school in that district.[2]

Pros and cons. From its inception, NCLB drew both support and criticism from across the political spectrum. Supporters saw it as a long overdue effort to set high standards and create real incentives for schools to meet them.[3] *Newsweek*'s Jonathan Alter spoke for many when he praised the fact that test scores would be broken down to see how minority groups perform, "instead of hiding their lagging test scores in larger averages. This will force even successful suburban districts to focus more on minority achievement, which should increase pressure to improve remedial classes across the board."[4]

Critics, however, worried that the law would fall short of its ambitious goals—in large part because states were free to devise their own tests. That created a temptation for states to do better not by improving the quality of their schools, but by setting lower standards.[5] There was also a fear that some schools would try to maintain high standards by limiting the number of underprivileged

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2 States were responsible for creating guidelines to determine which schools were dangerous. "Four Pillars of NCLB," US Department of Education, http://www.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/4pillars.html, Accessed March 10, 2009.

3 Chester E. Finn, Jr., "Leaving Education Reform Behind," *The Weekly Standard*, January 14, 2002.

4 Jonathan Alter, "Give the Pols a Gold Star," *Newsweek*, January 21, 2002.

5 In fact, at least one state, Missouri, lowered its standards after the law went into effect. Nancy Zuckerbrod, "Congress to Weigh 'No Child Left Behind,'" *Associated Press*, January 13, 2007. A 2007 study by the Northwest Evaluation Association found a wide disparity in the proficiency standards set by various states. G. Gage Kingsbury et al, "The State of State Standards: Research Investigating Proficiency Levels in Fourteen States," http://www.nwea.org/assets/research/national/State%20of%20State%20standards%20-%20complete%20report.pdf.

and minority students.[6] Finally, skeptics predicted that teachers, to ensure their students scored well, would "teach to the test" and neglect subjects the test did not measure, such as art or social studies.

But the choice provision drew little criticism. Who could object to moving motivated students to better schools?

School Choice in Chicago

In Chicago, *Chicago Tribune* education reporter Stephanie Banchero had closely followed the legislative battles, expert debates, and predictions for NCLB. A 13-year veteran reporter, Banchero applauded NCLB in principle. Though she took care to cover the new law objectively, she believed that the choice provision in particular was a progressive way to help poor families who wanted a better education for their children. Like many others, she saw the provision as a kind of civil-rights measure that could improve the quality of education for historically underserved black students. "I mean, doesn't that sound great?" says Banchero of her thinking at the time. "If you just get the kid into a better school, everything will work. Everybody thought it would help rescue low-income kids."[7]

But once the act came into force in early 2002, something unexpected happened. Because NCLB left many of the particulars to the states, local districts struggled to implement the specifics of the law's broad directives. The choice provision proved especially troublesome. Across the country, Banchero read, students eligible to leave failing schools for better ones simply were not taking advantage of it.[8] Moreover, those families that did opt for transfers ran up against unanticipated challenges. Reluctant administrators or local rules barred otherwise legitimate transfers.[9] Many high-performing schools across the country ran out of slots for transferring students.[10] This was an acute problem in several large cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, which soon had to limit the number of transfers.[11]

The situation in Chicago, the country's third-largest school system, was especially dire. The city could neither afford the transfers, nor manage the transportation piece. To cut costs,

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6 James E. Ryan, "The Perverse Incentives of the No Child Left Behind Act," University of Virginia School of Law, 2003 Public Law and Legal Theory Research Papers. December 9, 2003.

7 Author's interview with Stephanie Banchero, November 8, 2008, in Palo Alto, CA. All further quotes from Banchero, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

8 Nurith C. Aizenman, "Few Children Apply for School Transfers," *Washington Post*, June 20, 2002.

9 Elissa Gootman, "Schools Seeking Alternatives to Granting More Transfers," *New York Times*, September 30, 2003.

10 Dale Mezzacappa, "Limited Transfer Options Available: Students at 10 'Failing' Schools Can Leave," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 30, 2002.

11 Sewell Chan and Valeri Strauss, "Despite 'No Child' Law, Few Transfer Slots in DC Schools," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2004.

Chicago officials in early July 2002, just six months after NCLB was signed into law, decided to limit to 90 the number of schools into which students could transfer. Many of those were not much better than the failing schools they were intended to replace.[12] At the same time, Chicago school system administrators ruled that a new school couldn't be more than three miles from a transfer student's home. Though it was later loosened to encourage more students to transfer, the new restriction meant that most schools remained as segregated as before the law's passage, locking students in bad schools in the south and west of the city, and placing the better schools of the north and northwest just out of reach.[13]

At the same time, for the 2002-2003 school year—the first under NCLB—state officials determined that Chicago had 124,000 students eligible for transfer out of schools with flat or declining test scores. That was more than half the city's 240,000 public school population. Yet in August 2002, school officials had the capacity to offer only 29,000 of those students a chance to transfer. Perhaps because of the limited choices, only 1,900 students accepted. As Banchero reported, "whether it's because parents are satisfied with current conditions or were provided few good alternatives, only 1,900 Chicago Public Schools pupils… have requested and received transfers out of failing public schools."[14]

There were even fewer transfers offered the following school year. In August 2003, more than half of Chicago's 600 public schools received failing marks. The solution was a lottery. Superintendent Arne Duncan sent out a letter to the qualifying families to offer them the chance to enter a lottery to win one of only 1,000 transfer slots.[15] Lawmakers had underestimated just how many students were eligible to flee failing schools, and just how few good schools there were to accept them. Some schools, like magnet schools or schools with selective admissions criteria, were not even required to accept transfers.

The problem wasn't simply overcrowding, however. There was widespread resistance as well. In schools required to accept transfer students, parents protested that an influx of students from failing schools might bring down their schools' test scores.[16] Moreover, because many failing schools were clustered together, NCLB allowed students to transfer across district lines to attend stronger schools in neighboring communities—a tough sell to the receiving schools. Not surprisingly, so many Illinois districts created barriers to keep out transfer students that the provision allowing cross-border transfers was effectively nullified.

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12 Stephanie Banchero and Ana Beatriz Cholo, "Only 7% Seek Transfer to a Better School; Despite US Plan, Most City Pupils Not About to Move," *Chicago Tribune*, August 20, 2002.

13 Derrick Z. Jackson, "The Big Lie: 'No Child Left Behind,'" *The Boston Globe*, August 2, 2002.

14 Banchero and Cholo, "Only 7% Seek Transfer to a Better School."

15 Sam Dillon, "State Cutbacks Put Schools and Federal Law to the Test," *New York Times*, August 31, 2003.

16 Stephanie Banchero, "Federal School Reform Stumbles; Confusion Reigns Over Choice Plan," *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 2002.

Even with the reduced number of transfers, however, logistical and funding problems hobbled the choice provision. Transporting even hundreds of students to different, widely scattered schools proved a nightmare for Chicago. In response, officials decided to put the burden of getting children to a better school back on the parents. By 2003, they created a transportation allowance of 30 cents a mile, which could be used to pay for gas, or for public transportation.

A Beat Reporter Goes Deeper

By the summer of 2003, the *Tribune*'s Banchero found herself wondering about the NCLB choice provision. How successful was it? What did it mean for the children it was meant to help? Once an aspiring teacher, Banchero had spent well over a year writing mostly about the NCLB's policy implications. Now she found herself drawn to a different kind of story. "I wrote a lot of the national [stories about] 'this is what's going on with No Child Left Behind,' sitting at my desk, talking to government officials, talking to teachers, but not really getting into the classroom and saying okay, what does it mean on the ground?" she says.

Banchero had one idea for how to answer her question: find a dedicated student transferring to a good school from a failing one, and closely track the child's progress for an entire school year. This would mean immersing herself in the child's life for a long period of time, and eventually writing a feature-length story. Banchero, a daily beat reporter, had never taken on such a lengthy assignment. Such an article would mark a significant departure from her usual coverage of education policy and local schools.

Uncertain whether she should even propose the story to her editor, Banchero turned for advice to her close friend and *Tribune* colleague, Cornelia Grumman, a Pulitzer prizewinner who wrote about education in the paper's editorial pages but was on maternity leave. Banchero also approached Louise Kiernan, another colleague and Pulitzer winner, who was known, Banchero says, as "the writer at the paper." Kiernan had done long narrative pieces of the type Banchero was considering. Both Grumman and Kiernan encouraged her to pursue the story. "It was a really good idea," Kiernan recalls. "[Banchero] had taken this fairly arcane and complex and difficult-to-understand piece of legislation, and isolated one element of it, and then further isolated it into the story of one person. It had a lot of potential."[17]

Yes, no, maybe. Just before the start of the 2003-2004 school year, Banchero sent a memo explaining the idea to her direct editor at the Metro desk, Kaarin Tisue. Tisue, however, was a daily editor; she did not normally assign or supervise long-form enterprise projects. "I was leading the paper's education team only on a temporary basis," Tisue says.

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[17] Author's interview with Louise Kiernan, January 13, 2009, in Chicago, IL. All further quotes from Kiernan, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

> I was supervising multiple reporters and had many other simultaneous editing duties. I liked Stephanie's story idea and gave her the go-ahead to pursue [it], but I was never sure if I was going to land the story or if it would be another editor.[18]

It was not common for a beat reporter to take on a long-term project. Among other costs, that would mean one less reporter for daily stories. Tisue told Banchero she could start investigating, but did not take her off the daily beat. Nor could she provide Banchero with much editorial oversight on this project.

"It's not unique to the *Tribune*," says Grumman. "They're just focusing on getting the next day's paper out… [so] to present them with a large project in a newsroom culture is tough on an editor because all they see is the loss of a productive reporter."[19] Banchero also recognized that her pitch was not well developed: "I wish I [could say] I had this grand plan… [But] I had absolutely no idea what was going to happen or what I was going to do."

With encouragement from Grumman and Kiernan, Banchero decided to take advantage of the situation: She hadn't gotten a yes, but no one had said no. While Banchero would have limited editorial oversight inside the paper, she could at least start to look for a concrete focus for her story. As long as she continued to hand in her daily articles, she felt confident that her editors would not object if she continued to pursue the larger story.

Going In Blind

On September 7, 2003, Banchero and a photographer, Heather Stone, were assigned to produce a standard first-day-of-school story. They headed to Stockton Elementary in Uptown, a racially integrated neighborhood on Chicago's North Side. Because it was a good school with small class sizes and improving test scores, Banchero thought that she might well find an NCLB transfer student at Stockton. Sure enough, a crowd of children and parents were in the school's office signing up for classes. All of them had transferred to Stockton from failing schools. As Banchero interviewed them for her daily story, she simultaneously screened them for a child to shadow for the rest of the year.

Banchero tried to be quasi-scientific in making her choice. Hoping to control for certain variables, Banchero wanted a good student from a good home who could thrive in a better school. "What I wanted to show is, could this law work for a good student?" Banchero says of her criteria.

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[18] Kaarin Tisue, Email to author, January 28, 2009.

[19] Author's telephone interview with Cornelia Grumman, February 12, 2009. All further quotes from Grumman, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

> I didn't want to set too many parameters, but I didn't want to pick a family where the kid has special ed needs. That wouldn't have been a fair way to [do it]. So we tried to look for an average to good student where, if she could just get into a good school, it would work.

Banchero was quickly able to eliminate most of the 14 children in the office that morning. They either had special needs or were too young to articulate their thoughts and impressions. Banchero felt that, for this story, the subject had to be old enough to "be introspective about themselves and what's going on in their minds."

Finding a subject. But one parent caught Banchero's attention. Yolanda Carwell, an African-American single mother in her early 30s, had three children (two sons and a daughter) whom she was transferring to Stockton from a failing school—Holmes Elementary in Englewood, a neighborhood on the city's South Side. When Banchero interviewed Carwell for the following day's story, Carwell said she felt like she had "won the lottery" when she learned that she could transfer her kids into such a nice school.[20] Carwell, who had dropped out of high school at 17, spoke credibly about her commitment to helping her children do better. Banchero was impressed that Carwell herself was studying for the GED (General Educational Development), a substitute for a high-school diploma. "She said all the right things," Banchero recalls.

> She said exactly what you would want to hear. She said, "I was a high-school dropout and I want my kid to get a better education," and "I know the value of education," and "I don't want my kids to end up like me and it doesn't matter if I have to drive them to another state, I want them to go to a good school."

This, Banchero figured, was the kind of parent that NCLB was designed for: "It's somebody who was willing to do the work, and the government will help you," says Banchero. The reporter felt that, of Carwell's three children, one would make a fine subject: the daughter. Rayola was in fourth grade and seemed sharp: Carwell said she had even earned straight A's at her old school. The Carwells seemed, Banchero says, "like the perfect family."

What next? Banchero had found her subject, but she was far less clear on how to proceed. The goal was a story from the frontlines of a school classroom on how NCLB was working. But Banchero was not certain of what to look for, what pitfalls to avoid or that she would even be able to cull a meaningful story from following just one student. Nevertheless, Banchero hoped that a story would emerge as she went along. "I sort of went in blind," she says.

> I didn't know what [the story] was going to be. I didn't know how often I was going to be with [the Carwells], I didn't know if it was going to be a story. I was just sort of casting about to see what would happen. But so

[20] Stephanie Banchero, "Chapter One: One Girl's Struggle To Find A Future," *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 2004.

much happened in the first week that it became clear that this was a good story.

First Day, First Twist

After she finished her reporting for the next day's paper, Banchero decided to linger on in the school, spend some time with Rayola, and test her hunch that this was a promising child to follow. She accompanied Rayola to her first day in her new fourth-grade classroom. Banchero noticed that, though Rayola was a quick study, she had clearly missed out on some key concepts in her old school and was having a hard time keeping up. This, it turned out, was not simply because Rayola had come from an underperforming school. Towards the end of the first day, the assistant principal took Rayola aside and questioned her about her grade level. Though Rayola insisted she was in the fourth grade, the principal knew otherwise: Rayola had not passed the third grade the previous year.

Because the process of school transfers was so chaotic—Carwell had found out that her children could transfer only four days before the start of classes—many parents did not have time to access their children's records. As a result, Stockton teachers had to assess Rayola's abilities on the spot when she arrived that morning. They also had to take Carwell at her word when she informed them that Rayola was in the fourth grade. During the school day, however, the NCLB coordinator for Stockton was able to track down Rayola's records, which indicated that, though Rayola had earned straight A's, she had flunked third grade, mostly due to absenteeism. (A Chicago Public Schools rule stipulated that a child who missed more than 18 days of school automatically failed the year.) When Stockton officials confronted Carwell with the information, Carwell denied it before finally conceding the point.

Witnessing the scene, Banchero—who had stayed the entire school day—thought the stand-off made her choice of Rayola even more promising than she had hoped. "This is interesting," Banchero recalls thinking at the time. "Already there's an issue with what grade she's in?" There was another issue: Over the course of the day, Banchero had seen that Rayola was smart and attentive. If she had failed the third grade due to absenteeism, Banchero wondered what could be getting in the way of Rayola's progress. Why had she missed so much school?

Though she was not yet sure of the direction of her story or what the plot twist implied for her assumptions, Banchero decided Rayola Carwell would still make a good subject. Though the mother was still agitated from her discussion about Rayola's grade level, Banchero decided to approach her about a profile of Rayola. As Yolanda Carwell gathered her children to head home, Banchero explained that she'd like to write a story about Rayola, which would mean following the girl for the entire school year. When Carwell agreed, Banchero asked if she could accompany the family to school the next morning in order to get a better sense of how they managed the long trek from the South Side. Carwell had no objection.

Beginnings of a Theme

The next day, Banchero arrived at the Carwell residence before dawn to accompany the family to school. The Carwells, however, were already gone. Banchero raced to Stockton Elementary, but the Carwells weren't there either. Finally, the family arrived, right after the morning bell sounded at 9:20 a.m. Carwell explained that someone had slashed a tire on her car and they had to take public transportation instead. To make matters worse, because they were late, the children had missed the free breakfast to which they were entitled under federal guidelines.

By the end of the week, transportation had emerged as a major issue. Chicago had relaxed the 3-mile transfer limit, and Stockton was fully 13 miles from the Carwell home. With the car still out of commission, the family had to follow an elaborate system of bus transfers that took almost two hours. (Even with the car, traffic and distance combined for an hour-long commute.) The children were late and missed breakfast the third day of school, too. On Friday, the last day of Rayola's first week at the new school, they failed to show up altogether. Transportation was a subject Banchero could work with. "The main thing about No Child Left Behind and the [choice] provision was the transportation. That was the key to making the law work," Banchero says. "It was key. If transportation didn't work, that provision of the law did not work." This, she felt, was a relevant complication to her original concept. "My gut told me it was a good story," she adds.

Parental Consent. Once sure that she wanted to pursue the story, Banchero knew that informal permission would not suffice for the intensive, year-long reporting she wanted to do on Carwell's child. She needed to make sure that both the mother and the school understood exactly what kind of access she needed. Banchero approached the principal and asked her to arrange a meeting with Yolanda Carwell so that Banchero could explain her project.

The next Monday, the first day of the second week of school, the three sat down in the principal's office and Banchero laid out her plans to trail Rayola for the year. She brought Carwell copies of some of her stories—including the one from the first day of school, which featured a photograph of the family—and explained that she was going to follow Rayola everywhere. "This is the kind of stuff I want to do," Banchero recalls telling Carwell.

> I want to be able to follow you, I want to be able to be in the classroom, I want to be able to go in on any meeting… If there's anything you don't want me to do—if she's getting in trouble and you don't want me to be in the principal's office—you need to tell me that now because I'm going to go wherever she goes.

"I just figured she could just say no if she wanted to," Banchero says. To her surprise, Carwell and the principal readily agreed.

Behind the Scenes

The following weekend, Banchero decided to visit the Carwells at home to observe their lives outside the classroom. "I wanted to see the context for what was happening in the classroom. How did homework get done? What do they do on weekends?" says Banchero. "I thought something good was happening."

Banchero arrived on Saturday afternoon at the house Yolanda Carwell shared with her mother, sister, and nephew. The Carwells lived on Chicago's South Side in Englewood, a predominantly African-American neighborhood infamous for its high crime rate. Banchero knew that Rayola's old school, Holmes Elementary, was just around the corner on a dangerous street. Classrooms at Holmes were overcrowded, teachers weren't always qualified, and less than 30 percent of Holmes' students passed their annual state exams. The neighborhood and the school were a far cry from ethnically diverse and academically fast-paced Stockton. But in contrast to the trash-strewn street outside, Banchero found the Carwell house "beautiful, sparkling clean; it smelled like Pine-Sol." She adds:

> My first impression was there's a lot of love in this family. They may have problems, but this mother loves her kids and those kids were very respectful of the authority of their mother.

Banchero spent the day with the Carwells, trying to experience life as they lived it. "I always had my notebook with me, but I would just sort of hang out," Banchero says. She tried to meld into their weekend, but ultimately felt awkward. "It's just sort of weird hanging out at somebody's house and watching them do nothing," Banchero says. "They thought they needed to keep me entertained instead of just doing what they would regularly do, which is just lay on their bed and watch TV." This would be the first of many visits, however, and Banchero soon found that the family was able to relax around her.

On later visits, Banchero began to notice other details. For one thing, Yolanda Carwell's room was frequently "a disaster area." Yet Carwell spent a disproportionate amount of time there. While the children played, watched cartoons or even fought, Carwell was largely absent, shut in her room, talking on the phone or watching TV. Rayola, Banchero observed, was usually the one who mopped the floors and tidied up. "There was a dichotomy [there]," Banchero says. She was starting to wonder if Carwell's lack of engagement lay behind Rayola's absenteeism at her old school. After all, it was just around the corner—transportation could not have been a problem.

First Month at Stockton

Rayola's first month of school was fairly uneventful. The class moved at a brisk pace, but Rayola, now back in the third grade, seemed to be catching on. Three mornings a week, Banchero

sat in the back of the classroom and watched as the class covered reading and math, the two subjects tested under NCLB. She tried not to single out Rayola since the girl, already somewhat guarded and suspicious with Banchero, was still an outsider at Stockton. The reporter made sure to talk to Rayola daily and assessed her progress by checking in with the teacher and noting how well Rayola completed her assignments.

At around 11 a.m., Banchero would return to the *Tribune* offices downtown. Though her co-workers knew that she was spending time at Stockton, they did not know precisely what she was working on. Because Banchero was able to produce daily stories in addition to monitoring Rayola, her editors did not object to her late arrivals.

At this stage, Banchero would have welcomed formal assistance as she tried to make sense of what she was learning at Stockton Elementary. But she also realized why she was on the story alone. "The reality is… it's not that interesting [that Rayola missed a day of school]. It doesn't get interesting until you really get into the lives of these people, and it wasn't interesting in the beginning. So I think they were like, when you've got something, let us know," Banchero says. "It took a while to develop."

Progress. Meanwhile, things seemed to be going well for Rayola. Her teacher, Judy Fromm, was excellent—"one of the best teachers I've ever seen, and I've covered education for a long time," Banchero says. Fromm allotted time during class to explain concepts to Rayola that she hadn't learned in her previous school. She also assigned the girl a tutor who worked with her when Fromm was too busy. Though she had a long way to go in reading and writing, Rayola was excelling in math. She always did her homework, was well-behaved, and was so focused that Fromm sat the most talkative boy in the class next to her, knowing he would be unable to distract Rayola.

Observing Rayola's progress, Banchero felt she could discern the rough outline of her story. She was seeing a real and positive impact from NCLB: A smart child was being given the opportunity to learn in a safer, more challenging environment, and she was thriving. The story, Banchero thought, could make a real contribution to the national debate over the effectiveness of NCLB.

Obstacles

As the fall wore on, however, something changed. Rayola often seemed sluggish in class. Especially in the mornings, she sat through the most important 2 1/2 hours of the day—those that covered reading and math—struggling to stay awake. Banchero realized that Rayola and her brothers not only got up early; they also usually arrived too late for the free breakfast at school. Rayola was both sleep-deprived and hungry. That was when she arrived at school at all.

Often, the Carwell children missed school altogether. Several mornings a week, Banchero went to the Carwells' house at 6 a.m., and waited outside in her car. In October and on into November, more often than not the house stayed dark until 8—too late for the Carwells to make it to school on time, either by car or public transport. At that point Banchero, not wanting to intrude on the story, left for the *Tribune*. When she called Stockton later that day to find out if Rayola and her brothers had come to school, the answer was usually "no."

Yolanda Carwell. The problem, Banchero slowly acknowledged, was Yolanda Carwell. Carwell had chosen Stockton simply because she had recognized the name. She had not done enough research to discover how prohibitively far away it was. Although Banchero wanted to give Carwell the benefit of the doubt, she began to see that this behavior was typical. Despite her effusiveness on the first day of school, Carwell had trouble following through on resolutions. She often missed appointments, failed to return phone calls, and let opportunities pass her by.

There were other warning signs in Carwell's behavior. Stockton Elementary had a separate program that worked with families to resolve issues outside the classroom. Ada Ortiz, a social worker Stockton assigned to help Carwell find a steady job and a home closer to the school, soon grew frustrated with her. At first, Carwell was engaged and seemed to like the idea of finding a new house and a higher-paying job. "To me, that even made it more interesting because here was someone who, even though she's not the perfect mom, she's trying to make it work," Banchero says.

But these efforts soon fell through. Ortiz arranged several job interviews and appointments, but Carwell missed many of them. If she did arrive, other things went wrong: Carwell agreed to rent a nearby apartment, but when it came time for her to pay her half of the deposit, Carwell was nowhere to be found. Another time, Carwell simply failed to submit proper paperwork, and lost the apartment. Once Ortiz, anticipating Carwell's failure to follow up, drove her to the offices of a company that was hiring drivers to shuttle patients to and from doctors' appointments. After filling in applications and sitting for an interview, Carwell received an offer for a relatively well-paying job as a driver. The company even offered to take Carwell's children to school in the mornings, a boon since Carwell was having trouble transporting them on her own. But when the company tried to schedule training, Carwell never returned their calls and the job slipped away.[21]

Unintentional truants. By mid-November, Rayola had missed 14 of 46 days of school, was late another 12, and her academic performance was starting to suffer. Despite her intense focus and hard work, Rayola missed crucial parts of the curriculum: proper nouns in English and carrying in math. Without those fundamentals, she was starting to have trouble with the more

[21] Stephanie Banchero, "Chapter Two: Falling Back," *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 2004.

advanced lessons, and the progress she had made in her first few weeks was beginning to decelerate.

Banchero thought at first that Rayola's attendance problems were due to the transportation challenge—13 miles was a long way on public transport. But this was only one part of a larger picture. Shut in her room and disengaged, Carwell often let Rayola and her brothers stay up late watching television, which made it nearly impossible to wake them and get them out of the house in time: To make it to Stockton by the 9:20 bell, the kids had to be up by 6 a.m. Moreover, Carwell herself often had trouble waking up. Banchero never rang the doorbell, but it was hard to sit in her car and watch as the house stayed dark into the morning.

Ironically, when Carwell actually took a job, she made matters worse. She briefly worked at an early-morning job, which made taking her children to Stockton impossible. On those days, the children's aunt or grandmother took them, but the grandmother was too arthritic to walk, and so shepherded Rayola and her brothers on an even longer, more circuitous route. When there was no one to take them, the children simply stayed home. Soon Carwell quit the job, which Banchero learned was also characteristic behavior: Carwell never stayed in any job for too long. Occasionally, when she was between jobs, Carwell was forced to dip into the $191 monthly school transportation allowance the state gave her to pay instead for groceries or other necessities. At times, this meant she had no money for gas.

A thesis disintegrates. As Rayola's absences mounted and her progress in Fromm's classroom stalled, Banchero started to realize that her original premise was evaporating. To the extent possible, Rayola was working hard and taking advantage of the transfer to a better school, but Carwell was unintentionally hampering her success. This had little to do with NCLB's choice provision or the transportation issue. As Thanksgiving approached, Banchero wondered whether Rayola remained a good subject. She questioned the value of writing a story that could lead readers to dismiss NCLB's potential because of one impoverished and struggling family.

At a loss, Banchero grew increasingly frustrated with Carwell. Grumman, who had followed Banchero's reporting closely and was advising her on the story daily, says "she was just so incredibly frustrated by it that she didn't know what to do." Grumman encouraged Banchero to keep digging, however. Kiernan, who by that point was functioning as Banchero's de facto adviser, echoed Grumman. So instead of abandoning a story that seemed to be coming apart, Banchero continued to go to Stockton three mornings a week.

From Stockton to Attucks

One day just after Thanksgiving, Stockton's principal decided to confront Carwell with the fact that her children had missed one third of the year's school days. Banchero was there, and listened as Carwell denied there was a problem. "You don't know what you are talking about,"

she told the principal. "They haven't missed that much school."[22] The conversation quickly escalated as the principal threatened to call social services. Finally, Carwell admitted that the children didn't listen to her and stayed up too late. The principal promised to talk to them.

It seemed that the conversation had been an effective one. For two weeks after the confrontation between Carwell and the principal, Rayola and her brothers were in school and on time every day. Soon, however, the absences resumed and, after Christmas vacation, the Carwell children did not return to Stockton.

Apparently fed up with what she considered a meddling principal, Yolanda Carwell decided to pull her children out of Stockton. As she explained to Banchero, Carwell found a new school for her children by logging onto the school district's website, which listed all the schools in Chicago. She chose Attucks Elementary, which was closer to her home. What Carwell didn't realize, however, was that Attucks was a failing school. She had mixed up the website's categories. Attucks was an all-black school, with classes one-third larger than Stockton's. Only 35 percent of its students passed their state exams, compared to 56 percent at Stockton.[23] By the time they left Stockton, the Carwell children had missed 24 of 75 days of school, but the pace of the third-grade curriculum at Attucks was so slow that Rayola was still far ahead of her new classmates.

Banchero was stunned. "[Stockton officials] tried to do what they could to fix the problem," Banchero says. "They just couldn't fix it. Short of going and physically bringing [Rayola], there wasn't anything they could do." To make matters worse, Banchero found herself barred from Attucks. "It was a terrible school and the principal prevented me from seeing what was going on in the school," Banchero says.

For most of January, Banchero did not have access to Rayola's new classroom. Banchero suspected that Carwell encouraged the principal to keep her out, but when she questioned Carwell directly, the mother told Banchero that she was welcome to observe Rayola in the classroom. So Banchero confronted Carwell: "Tell me now if you don't want me to follow Rayola." Carwell insisted that she had no objection. Banchero also set up a three-way phone conversation with a Chicago Public Schools communications official and Carwell to clarify that she had the mother's ongoing permission to follow Rayola. Finally, Banchero called Arne Duncan, the superintendent of Chicago public schools, who instructed the principal to let Banchero into the school once Banchero had secured Carwell's permission.

End of the story? By this point, Banchero was losing faith in her story idea. By placing Rayola in a failing school, Carwell had undermined Banchero's initial thesis. It was only January. Banchero had intended to follow Rayola until June. How could she write about NCLB now? On the other hand, she felt that she had a duty to tell this story. "I had a moral and ethical obligation

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22 Stephanie Banchero, "Chapter Two: Falling Back."

23 Stephanie Banchero, "Chapter Three: Starting Over," *Chicago Tribune*, July 20, 2004.

to the subject matter," says Banchero. "Most people don't get to see what I was seeing. I had this incredible opportunity to see a law in action, and I felt responsible to the readers, to the community, to Rayola, and to kids like her to tell the story." If she told it well, Banchero reasoned, the piece could help other children like Rayola.

Banchero felt lost. The stress of the project, coupled with her daily workload at the *Tribune*, was also starting to take a physical toll. "She was popping Advils™ like Chiclets™," Grumman recalls. Frustrated, confused, and worn down, Banchero was ready to give up on the story. Grumman, however, continued to believe that Banchero was onto something and advised her not to give up. "This is a broader story," she told her.

Salvaging a Story

Somewhat heartened by Grumman's advice, Banchero worked to salvage a story from her reporting. Towards the end of January 2004, she thought she had found an angle: Rayola was doing her part. She was driven, focused, and hard working, and did all that was asked of her. It was everything else that was getting in her way.

As she struggled to make sense of it, Banchero began talking about the story more openly at work. When she told Tisue about Rayola's transfer to Attucks, Tisue wondered if perhaps Banchero's story had reached its logical end. Was it time to run the article?

Though she was still unsure of the story's thesis, Banchero felt strongly that she needed more time to see how Rayola performed at her new school. Granted, the story was no longer the one she had set out to write, but that didn't mean there was no story there. It was, Banchero felt, too early to call it quits. "My gut was like, no, it's not about the law any more, it's not about whether or not No Child Left Behind works, it's about why it didn't work [in this case] and the only way to tell why it didn't work is to follow this family," says Banchero.

> I didn't really know what I was doing or when we'd publish. I just assumed it would be the end of the school year. I didn't know what form it would take, whether it would be one story [or a series]. I didn't know. But I just felt we needed to wait it out. I felt we just needed to marinate the story for a while.

After talking with Banchero, Tisue agreed. So Banchero went back to reporting the story—albeit still without a formal editor (though she was meeting regularly with Kiernan and Grumman). That was about to change.

The Projects Team

By late January, word about Banchero's story had made its way around the *Tribune* newsroom. Managing Editor James O'Shea, who had heard about the story and thought it had potential, suggested that Banchero move temporarily from the Metro desk to the *Tribune*'s Projects Team. The Projects Team's purpose was to spot and develop stories that were broader and longer than the daily copy. These covered a range of topics. "It could be anywhere in the area, anywhere in the country, anywhere in the world," says George Papajohn, the deputy projects editor at the time. "It could be hard investigations, traditional investigations. It could be explanatory. It could just be a good narrative tale, where you learned something in the process." Often these were published as multi-part series. In order to bring these ambitious articles to maturity, the Projects Team provided *Tribune* reporters with enhanced resources and editorial support.

Though Banchero was already halfway through her reporting, the Projects Team was ready to help her shape and publish Rayola's story. Banchero was temporarily relieved of her daily duties and assigned to work with Deputy Projects Editor George Papajohn and Associate Managing Editor Robert Blau. Tisue also would continue to work on the project as an editor. Kiernan, a projects reporter, would continue to advise. "Poor Stephanie," says Papajohn. "At one point she maybe felt she didn't get enough attention. Now she had three editors staring at her in the room."[24] Banchero, however, was relived. She had "muddled" her way through reporting the first half of the school year; now she was meeting and collaborating weekly with her editors.

Shifting the angle. The Team's first order of business was to get Banchero writing. This would, the editors hoped, help Banchero shape the material she had already gathered and focus her reporting going forward. Initially, Banchero and her editors decided that the story should run as a two-part series spanning the school year. Banchero would write one "chapter" on Rayola at Stockton, and another about Rayola at Attucks.

In February, Banchero submitted her first draft to her new editors. The first "chapter" set the scene, described Rayola's transfer to Stockton, and featured several anecdotes about her home life. Because Banchero did not yet have enough material to tell the story of Rayola at Attucks, she turned in a placeholder second chapter, which closely tracked Rayola's progress through the fall and up to her transfer to Attucks. But her editors found the straightforward chronological account rather dull. Banchero agreed with them. "To be honest, it wasn't that interesting, and I think helped them decide that the second story had to be more than just a 'tick tock,'" says Banchero. "The focus of the story completely changed."

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[24] Author's interview with George Papajohn, January 13, 2009, in Chicago, IL. All further quotes from Papajohn, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

The editors felt that Banchero had focused too narrowly on Rayola in the classroom, and resisted the most compelling angle to the story. They argued that Rayola had failed not because of NCLB shortcomings (although lack of transportation played a role), but because of her home life. The story therefore had to include the role played by poverty and lax parenting. "Stephanie [Banchero] had done a really nice job of getting access to the classroom and did a really nice job of showing us what was happening there," says Papajohn. "But what we needed to get a more complete picture was the perspective of the mom. We needed to open the lens on the full spectrum of influences on Rayola's life, and on her ability to succeed in the Chicago school system through No Child Left Behind."

Third Chapter?

By March 2004, Associate Managing Editor Blau had become convinced that the story needed a separate, third chapter on Yolanda Carwell. "She was an important figure in the story," says Blau. "We needed to explore, both her role as a parent and her feelings about how this was working out… and present her as a three-dimensional person."[25] The additional material would go in between the two chapters on Rayola in school. The other editors agreed with Blau and suggested that Banchero "background" Carwell, a process that meant looking for pertinent legal documents—bankruptcies, criminal, and civil suits—at the courthouse. It was a procedure the *Tribune* followed for any adult appearing prominently in their pages. "You don't want to have any surprises," Papajohn explains. "And it's just a good reflex anyway. It was due diligence."

Pushback. Banchero had long been aware that Carwell was an important figure in the story. In fact, she included several anecdotes about her in an early draft. But she was unsure that Carwell merited such intense focus. Though she agreed with her editors that Rayola's home life was central to her success, Banchero insisted that the story was fundamentally about Rayola and her school year, and pushed back against Blau's suggestion. "She's a very diligent, aggressive reporter and outspoken person," says Papajohn.

> She's no wallflower. I think she was just questioning, why do we need to do that? She needed to hear the explanations as to why we need to do it. What is the journalistic reason? How is the story better served? How is the public better served? How is the reader better served by doing this type of reporting?

In her head, Banchero marshaled her arguments against making Carwell a central character in the story. First, she told herself, reporting on Carwell herself—as she would have to do if the story took this turn—would be laborious and fruitless. "I just felt like, gosh, that's a waste of time," Banchero recalls. "She was so much more difficult to report on. Following Rayola was easy:

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[25] Author's telephone interview with Robert Blau, April 23, 2009. All further quotes from Blau, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

just go to class and you watch her in class; you go over to her house, you watch her at home. The mom was far more complicated. I just didn't want to go through all that." Banchero felt that Carwell had seldom been completely forthright with her, and suspected that this was unlikely to change.

Banchero also felt it was premature to press Carwell on why she let her children miss school or why the home was often chaotic. "Pushing Yolanda to answer pointed questions about why her kids were missing school might have changed the trajectory of the story," Banchero says. "I did not want to insert myself into a developing story by asking questions that might make her change her typical routine."[26] She adds:

> I wanted her to see me as an embedded reporter simply there to watch the action, not [as] someone who was judging her by asking questions that made her uncomfortable… I wasn't judgmental. I didn't ask her those really probing questions in the beginning [because] I didn't want her to turn off from me.

Second, if an entire chapter focused on Carwell, that meant using material Banchero had already collected during her earlier reporting on Rayola. The two women had spent significant periods of time together, and Banchero had on several occasions interviewed Carwell directly. She had watched her study for the GED, and followed as she hunted for jobs and apartments.

Banchero had behaved at all times as a professional reporter, notebook out and visible. She had consistently shown appropriate journalistic distance: She had turned Carwell down when she asked Banchero for money to purchase groceries, and had refrained from taking Rayola and her brothers home when Carwell was late picking them up. But despite Banchero's care, had Carwell understood that the months of conversation could be used in the story? "For September, October, November, December—four months—I built a relationship with [Carwell] based on the story I thought I was going to write," says Banchero. It seemed reasonable to assume that Carwell understood that Banchero wasn't a friend, but a professional reporter. But had she?

Finally, Banchero needed Carwell's cooperation. If Banchero were going to write the last chapter of her story about Rayola, she did not want to risk losing access to the child.

How to tell her?

But her editors were firm. By the end of March, Banchero agreed that Carwell was a key actor in Rayola's drama, and that the story had to include a profile of the mother. To assuage her misgivings, the editors tried to point out the positive aspects of Carwell's mothering. They emphasized her agency in the transfer process, and her tremendous influence on all aspects of her

[26] Stephanie Banchero, Email to author, April 16, 2009.

children's lives. "I remember telling Stephanie… what an impressive thing it was for [Carwell] to get involved with this program in the first place," Papajohn recalls. "She had to have some vision of a better life, and she had to take a positive step to make this happen, to make the transfer. And so that obviously is part of the story. It wasn't like [Rayola] was picked [out] by the school. It wasn't a passive thing."

None of this, however, helped Banchero resolve her immediate dilemma: What to tell Carwell? She had to inform her about the planned second chapter in the series. The problem was her reaction. Would she be furious? Would she refuse to answer questions about herself? Would she forbid Banchero to report further on Rayola? Did that matter? To what extent did Banchero still need Carwell's cooperation?

Her friend and colleague Grumman counseled Banchero to simply explain the altered scope of her article. It was irrelevant if Carwell became angry or felt betrayed, Grumman argued. "[Banchero's] job was about telling the truth," says Grumman. "It wasn't telling just a piece of the truth. And sometimes we stumble over larger truths in this pursuit of finding a narrower one." Her editors on the Projects Team, who lacked the personal ties Banchero had developed with the family, had the same advice. Says Blau:

> It's extremely important to be candid with a subject, while also being compassionate and explaining probably more than once that we're going to be sharing details—sometimes intimate details—about their lives with many readers. And that experience is a jolting one for most people who, despite that conversation, and no matter how uncompromising and clear it is, are still very, very, very, very stunned to see themselves plastered all over the real estate of a big newspaper.

Blau and Papajohn insisted that Banchero tell Carwell the facts of the story before it went to press. "We aimed to ensure Carwell would get a chance to hear what [Banchero] had found before it was in the paper," say Blau and Papajohn.[27] Adds Papajohn: "The goal remained the same from when she started out: How do we shine a light on this larger issue?

> Nobody sets out… writing a story thinking, well, I'm writing this story in order to please the person I'm writing about. I think what we want to do is find a way to be fair to people we write about, who give us access to their lives, and to feel like we've handled ourselves in an ethical manner, and we've treated them fairly, and that we've given the reader a complete picture. So if the debate came down to, well, she's going to end up being mad at me, or she already is mad at me, I think the response would be, one, you just don't know what's going to anger somebody in these

[27] Robert Blau and George Papajohn, Email to author, April 13, 2009.

> situations. And the goal here is not to foster a relationship between you and the subject of your story. The goal is to present a full and complete picture of the story you're pursuing.

Banchero knew that Blau and Papajohn were right. "This is what journalism is, this is what we do," Banchero says. "We only go for the truth and we don't worry about people's feelings because that's not what we're here to do." On the other hand, Banchero had spent six months with the Carwells and, as detached as she had tried to be, there was no escaping the fact that she had developed a connection to the family. She wanted to be professional, but she did not want to be cruel. As the decision of how to break the news to Carwell bore down on her, Banchero developed a severe stomach ailment. "I just got violently sick over the whole thing because I just felt so bad," Banchero recalls. She knew the time was overdue to correct the situation—but how?