

Kyle was never a star student, but he got by. A quiet and shy boy, he managed to get passed from grade to grade without much notice. He realized early on that if he just stayed out of trouble and turned in assignments, his teachers would be satisfied and he could earn Cs on his report cards. He was the second of three children who lived with their mother in a small rural town. His mom left school early to start working and was pleased that her son was doing fine in school.

When Kyle was in third grade, his teacher told his mother that he would be participating in a morning math program. Kyle did not hate math; he did not hate—or love—any subject, so he dutifully attended. He played some computer games each morning with little interaction with the teacher's aide, who opened the door when he and 10 other students arrived every day.

In the fifth grade, Kyle was assigned to a new teacher and was pleased to see that the 10 students from his third grade math program were also in his class. He was not asked to come to school early that year. Instead, Kyle's teacher told his mom that she would be using a special math program in class for all of her students. Kyle thought nothing of it since all his classmates had the same book. He noticed that his cousin, who was in another fifth-grade classroom, had a different math book. His cousin's book was newer.

After a long summer, Kyle started middle school. He reported to the office the first day and received his class schedule. He was pleased to see history listed as his first period class. He had secretly enjoyed learning about American History in the fifth grade. He was one of the only students to memorize the Preamble to the Constitution, though he never let on to his teacher that he had learned it. He was also fascinated whenever he saw replicas of actual historical documents, such as John Hancock's original signature and old photos. He was especially interested in the government, how the first president came to be, and how people get elected to office.

Kyle got to his first period and was relieved to see many familiar faces of students who were in his fifth-grade class. He sat down next to them and shared their slightly bewildered first-day-of-middle-school looks. As he moved through his day, he noticed that most of his friends were in all of his classes—what a relief! His last period was math. His teacher seemed kind and explained that they were lucky. This class was an “easy A” because they would be reviewing fifth-grade math. She passed out the books and Kyle noticed that it looked a lot like the math book his cousin used the year before, but it was brand new. He would make sure to use a book cover to keep it nice all year.

Kyle's middle school experience seemed okay. He learned that grades matter to people much more in middle school and that “passing” was anything above an F. So, Kyle was “passing” middle school. Still on the shy side, he wanted to play a little sports at school, or maybe join the history club, or the future teacher's club (maybe he'd like to teach history one day), but none of his friends were involved in those activities, and he felt uncomfortable around unfamiliar people.

So Kyle just went to school every day, turned in homework, and continued to pass his classes. As he crossed the stage at the eighth-grade promotion ceremony, Kyle imagined what high school would be like and decided that it would be different. He decided to tell his high school counselor about his secret interest in history and his idea about becoming a history teacher—maybe he could teach at his own middle school. Maybe he would even run for a student body office. That would be something!

On the first day of high school, Kyle reported to the office for his class schedule. He was confused to see that he had no history class. He had all the regular subjects, and two electives called Life Skills and High School Success, but no history. While that was disappointing, he was comforted to see so many familiar faces in his classes throughout the day. His sixth-period math class was interesting.

The teacher was young and energetic. This was his first teaching job and he was very happy to be at that school. Kyle knew that ninth-graders at his high school took algebra. His book was called Readiness for Algebra. His cousin's book was called Algebra: College-Prep, but algebra is algebra, he guessed.

At the end of the ninth grade, Kyle received a call slip to see his counselor. His counselor seemed very nice. Since he was passing all of his classes, Kyle intended to tell her about his interest in history, his plans for a career in teaching, and his hopes of running for school office in the spring.

Before he got a chance, his counselor told him that she was meeting with all students who were at risk of not graduating—not graduating! She told him that many students like him in the Title I program . . . what program? . . . with a history of poor test scores . . . huh? . . . often had trouble passing the high school graduation exam . . . you have to pass a test to graduate from high school? She was also worried that he might not complete the required high school coursework for graduation unless he attended summer school each year.

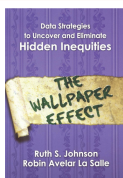
As it turns out, Kyle was on a different track from other students. Though he never realized it (in retrospect, he suspected), Kyle had trouble in math as early as second grade. As a result, he was identified “Title I,” which meant the school had to give him extra support. Also, because his family sometimes spoke Spanish at home, he was considered an English learner and had to get extra help for that, too. Even though Kyle almost never spoke Spanish himself, his label put him into certain classes and kept him out of others.

The morning program was supposed to provide that extra support and close his math and EL gap, but it did not. His elementary school grouped all the fifth-grade Title I students into one class to provide them extra support. That was supposed to close the gap, but it did not. The middle school placed students in pathways based on fifth-grade test scores, so Kyle and the other “at risk” students were grouped together for math, which by virtue of master scheduling constraints, grouped them together most of the day. Finally, the high school used test scores and teacher recommendations for placement in ninth-grade courses. Based on his middle school record, Kyle was placed in less rigorous courses. To make room for those helper classes, history was deferred that year.

That day with the counselor, he learned that biology and chemistry were required courses, but that he could not take them until he took algebra and geometry. It turns out that Algebra Prep doesn't count for anything but elective credit. He learned that the high school graduation exam was administered to 10th-graders and contained middle school and high school material that he never studied in his classes. He saw that his electives and lower-level classes took up the spaces other students were using to graduate on time. For the first time, he felt very out of place and different from other students. He let the counselor talk, count credits, show him summer school schedules and lists of courses, testing dates, and addresses to local continuation high schools and adult schools. When she finished, she asked if he had any questions. “No. Thank you.” As he left the office, he realized he forgot to mention that he loved history. Kyle attended summer school, was transferred to an alternative program, and then one day stopped going to school.

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From [The Wallpaper Effect: Data Strategies to Uncover and Eliminate Hidden Inequities](#) by Dr. Robin Avelar La Salle and Ruth S. Johnson



Dr. Robin Avelar La Salle is the Co-founder and CEO of Orenda Education, a technical assistance organization with over 20 years of experience in successfully partnering with schools and districts to build a new foundation for systems and practices that are grounded in equity, driven by data, and sustained through collaborative learning. Orenda's approach improves student outcomes and creates a path for college or career opportunities for all students.