



We Work To Be at One with Our Community

MARION NESBITT

"We do surely believe," states the author of this article, "that the color, the light, the balance, the order, the way of living at Maury School becomes a part of those who come to it, and becoming a part, makes living better. Each time the school serves the community, each time the community serves the school, the threads that bind these two together become stronger, weaving a pattern of warmth and good will."

PEOPLE, many people, are coming and going in and out of the Maury School building each day. Parents and children are often in the hallways, in the lobbies, in the offices, and in and out of the cafeteria and the classrooms. Parents sit in the lobbies and hallways, they stand around and talk to teachers and others of their friends. At almost

anytime during the day one may see mothers or fathers who have come for a committee meeting, who have come to accompany teachers and children on trips, to offer to do shopping for school, to stay with children in order that a teacher may attend a conference of some kind, or who have just come to talk. The mother hostesses in the

cafeteria may be donning their especially designed pinafores preparatory to helping during the lunch periods. Fathers may have come to repair a scooter or a wagon or to help with a paint job. The postman, after delivering the mail, may go into a room to ask one of his friends to save him a Carnival ticket or to tell of the arrival of a young son.

The policeman who helps the children cross the street may come to lunch, collecting a small crowd around him, glad of the opportunity to inspect his holster and belt at closer range. Visitors who have come to observe school practices are going in and out of classrooms as they please. The phone rings, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is calling to tell of an exhibit that would be of special interest to the school. The curator of the Valentine Museum calls to say that Maury School may borrow an old flint-lock gun for use in a play. The Assistant Superintendent of Schools calls to make an appointment with some apprentice teachers relative to positions in the city schools. Someone from a distant part of the state telephones to know if he may bring twenty-five visitors to the school the next day. Parents call to leave important messages for children or to say they may be counted upon to take responsibility for certain school jobs.

Threads of Understanding

This movement of people, free to come and free to go, is not one of confusion but one of order, the order that comes when each person has purpose and feels that he is needed and wanted and a part of a larger whole.

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This binding of Maury School with the community is done by multitudinous threads, here and there, strong and sure, tightly woven together. Much of the strength of this weaving is generated by the hundreds of little things or seemingly little things that go on in the school each day for the people who are a part of it; things such as sewing on a torn sash, understanding when a child is late or absent, helping one who has lost his lunch money, speaking encouraging words when encouragement is needed, believing in children when they seem to fail, believing in parents and helping them toward adequacy.

When so much is written and said about the failure of parents to rear their children well it becomes increasingly important to help parents develop a growing sense of adequacy, a growing feeling of confidence within themselves. One of the greatest services a school can render is the service of helping parents to see better ways of living with their children. Teachers have spent many years in studying ways and means of helping children work through their problems. When parents are in close touch with a school they see teachers dealing with children in many different situations and from these situations the parents learn just as teachers learn from parents in situations that are new to them. Parents

who feel frustrated and in consequence are sometimes upset or disgruntled come to appreciate a school that does not hold these feelings against them.

When the people in a community have faith in a school, problems large and small, touching many different phases of life are brought to it. Adults come seeking advice and understanding in domestic crises. Mothers come to get ideas for favors and entertainment for children's parties and for luncheons for their friends. They come for recipes and menus to help them in meal-planning or for help in preparing foods suitable to serve to a sick child. Fathers have come to inspect the painting on woodwork before beginning the redecoration of a home or to find out better ways of planting shrubbery on a lawn.

Children confidently believe that the school will be adequate for their needs; adequate to help them choose a summer camp, to advise an older brother or sister who is in difficulty, to find a lost dog, or cure a sick cow. Billy, a boy in the third grade, came to school one day to say that Mrs. Johns' cow, Nelly, had lost her cud. Mrs. Johns, a former neighbor now living on the outskirts of the city, had phoned his mother saying that she had been unable to find anyone who could advise her in this difficulty. Billy had assured his mother that he could find out from the school just what should be done. On hearing of the cow's plight the teacher as well as the children were at a loss since both had somehow thought that chewing the cud was a figure of speech. However, Billy insisted it was a reality. After discussing ways and means to remedy the situation a decision was

made to telephone the local dairy council for advice. This council each year sent to the school pictures of fat cows contentedly grazing, and healthy children happily drinking milk. The first person talked to at the council was somewhat vague in her answers and leaned also to the figure of speech interpretation but after hearing further details she decided to talk with the council's director of research. This director in turn talked with a veterinarian who supplied the needed information. Billy hurried home with the remedy, carrying it written on a piece of paper, and happy to relate, Mrs. Johns' cow, Nelly, lived and thrived.

School Events Involve the Community

The large school events that come each year which all in Maury School have helped to create and on which all work to insure success, bring school and community into close relationship. In these events the school gives what no other institution can give. It is this school with its unique function that brings these people and these things together. It is this school that gives these people a place to work on these common concerns, that gives kindliness and friendliness and status to those who come to work for it.

Fall Carnival

The school Carnival which comes early in the fall provides an evening of fun and frolic for the community as well as being a rich source of individual and group learnings. It is the one event held at the school for which there is a monetary charge. It is from

the proceeds of this undertaking that the budgetary demands of the Parent-Teacher Association are met.

For a week or more before the Carnival takes place the whole school staff, the children of every school group, and scores of parents have been busy making plans and collecting and assembling whatever is needed for booths and special attractions. Dozens of children stay after school to help parents and teachers and the janitorial staff get the building ready for the evening. The cafeteria is cleared of tables and benches, booths are set up and bright streamers, balloons, carnival hats, hot dogs, popcorn, candy and soft drinks deck the place. Much of the food is given by local merchants.

The classrooms are transformed, stripped of their usual furnishings to become for an evening a place of Carnival revelry. In one of them is a puppet show put on by some of the "alumni" of Maury, in another a short movie, especially appealing to children, is shown. There is a Cake Auction presided over by a real auctioneer who holds prospective customers spellbound with his jargon. The cakes are made by the mothers or donated by local bakers. There is an Opportunity Shop where slightly-worn clothes of good quality and workmanship may be had at small cost. The "Country Store" with its jars and cans of homemade and home-grown foods is always well patronized. A group of parents takes especial interest in creating an oldtime atmosphere for this attraction with a pot-bellied stove, a pickle barrel and a cracker barrel.

The Craft Shop grows in popularity each year. Here, parents, teachers and

children display their handicrafts — hooked rugs, quilting, crocheted lace, plain and fancy sewing, metal work, pottery and paintings. One of the fathers brings his cages of canary birds and explains how he raises them. One of the mothers sets up a quilting frame and demonstrates her art while a father shows a hooked rug in process. Another father, who is a baker, squirts an extra layer of icing on any cake purchased at the Cake Auction. One year one of the mothers brought as a door prize a live turkey gobbler she had raised. The turkey was housed in a large cage in the lower hall in the thickest of the crowd where he obligingly gobbled at frequent intervals, adding his bit to the current excitement. One of the classrooms is set up as a lounge and staffed by officers of the Parent-Teacher Association. This is a quiet haven for parents whose offspring, late in the evening, are still zestful and unfatigued.

Besides the attractions in the classrooms, the Big Show, in which a large number of children are taking part, is in progress in the playroom. There are two performances in order that all may have opportunity to see it. There is always an added excitement about nine o'clock when the last show ends and members of the cast, in assorted costumes, become a somewhat preferred part of the Carnival crowd, everyone being eager to see that they are properly and quickly served.

Besides the members of the school community many other friends of the school come to help with the Carnival. Professors and apprentice teachers from the Richmond Professional Institute of the College of William and Mary lend

a hand wherever needed. Fathers and mothers and husbands and friends of teachers help take up tickets, direct the traffic, make announcements, run the movie machine and help to count pennies and nickels and dimes for hours after the crowd has gone home.

All of the budgetary demands of the school are most adequately met. Intertwoven with the feeling of satisfaction, the feeling of work well done, is the talk of how we will improve this, how we will change that, and what new features we can add to make the Carnival better next year.

Parents Luncheon

The Parents Luncheon comes on a day of the school week when children do not come to school. It is held on a day set aside by the Superintendent of Schools for encouraging city-wide plans for parents and teachers to work together for children. Each school may plan a day which best suits its needs. Since Maury School is open every Tuesday evening for parent conferences the staff decided that this day should somehow be different. Believing that there would be value in strengthening social contacts between parents and parents and between parents and teachers, the staff decided to plan a luncheon for this day.

For this occasion the cafeteria is transformed into a dining room for adults and decorated as for a party. Children invite the parents and plan with their teachers how this may best be done. Some of the children write notes of invitation, some paste mimeographed notices in folders or booklets of their own making, others get results by oral reports and glowing accounts.

The parents come, several hundred each year, dressed in their best and in holiday mood—mothers who have made arrangements for someone to care for the children, fathers who have asked off from work. They come early and are shown around the building by committees of children who come to school just for this purpose. The children show them the library, the playroom, the exhibits, the classrooms, all of which have a festive atmosphere as if awaiting guests. The children point out new and interesting books and objects. They speak of current films which have especially appealed to them. They explain how the all-school committees function. They answer questions. The parents linger over lunch; they talk with teachers and others of their friends. They offer their services to the school; they express their appreciation.

Christmas Celebration

From a small beginning indoors, the Christmas celebration has become a large undertaking out-of-doors. Each year the number participating in it has become larger and the community celebrating with us has widened beyond the neighborhood of Maury School.

The tree around which the celebration takes place is a beautiful fir, alive and growing. It stands near the center of the school yard. Firemen from the nearby engine house come with ladders to arrange the lights and to decorate the tree. The ornaments are made by the children from beautiful gold and silver and colored aluminum foil given to the school by a neighboring manufacturing plant. The children

stand around under the tree handing up the ornaments and making suggestions. Teachers and children run back and forth during the day to see how the work is progressing and to say, "Put that one higher," "Put that one lower," or "Fill up that space there," in the time-honored tradition of Christmas tree decorators.

Out-of-door music and singing were at first a problem. Mimeographed sheets of all the carols to be sung are sent to the homes. A special chorus of mothers, fathers, teachers and other adults stand together to give unison to the singing. A group of children with tonettes carry the air to some of



the carols. One of the fathers plays a violin. The special teacher of music is there to lead the chorus. Several days before the event this letter of invitation, bearing a Christmas decoration, goes to all the homes of the children:

"You and your friends are cordially invited to Maury School on Tuesday evening to participate in the school's celebration of the Christmas season. Carols will be sung around the lighted Christmas tree on the school yard. After the singing everyone is invited to a reception in the cafeteria.

"If it is cold we will wear our warmest clothing. Grown-ups who can conveniently do so are asked to bring lighted lanterns. Children who can are asked to bring flashlights. All who like will wear bright-colored gloves or coats or hats or scarfs. Such arrangements will add to the attractiveness of the occasion.

"We are looking forward to a very pleasant evening and your presence will make it a happier one for all of us."

As eight-o'clock of the evening near Christmas approaches, the people of the community begin to gather. They come in their bright colors with their flashlights and with their lighted lanterns — railroad lanterns, stable lanterns and antique lanterns. The adults go into the classrooms with the children. On the hour of eight, the large, full-toned school bell rings out, the long lines from every classroom begin to move. When the crowd reaches the school yard the tree is dark, the music begins and all gathered there sing "O Fir Tree Dark." As the last words die away the lights go up and many small children in heart are lost in wonder.

After the carol singing everyone goes to the reception in the cafeteria. The large room is candlelighted. There are lace cloths, silver services, Christmas greens and soft music. The room is crowded, the school family shares the spirit of Christmas, and cherishes a memory for another year.

When Fathers Are Guests

On an evening in mid-winter a dinner is arranged by the school especially in honor of the fathers of the children. Each child makes and decorates the table mat and placecard which his father will use. Often a message is written on the placecard such as "Hi! Dad. I made this. I love you." These messages seem to have universal appeal and are always treasured. Teachers sit with the fathers of the children they teach. The cafeteria manager carefully plans a menu that will especially appeal to men. Some of the mothers wait on the tables. There is a long, flower-decked speakers table at which sit the officers of the Parent-Teacher Association, the principal, some of the ministers in the community and the speaker of the evening. This speaker is always the Superintendent of Schools. He has never missed one of these dinners and the fathers look forward with interest to what he will say. After the dinner there is group singing; sometimes a song or skit by some of the fathers. Then the superintendent speaks. He speaks in a clearly understandable way of the important issues in education and how these issues affect the children of Maury as they go to school each day. After dinner the guests stand around and talk, many go to the classrooms where children have put in conspicuous

places some of their treasured school possessions. The next day there is much talk of what my father said, what my father did, and what he thinks.

June Breakfast

The June Breakfast is spoken of from one year to the next. Small children ask in the early fall when it will begin to get under way. Parents ask in the early spring what the theme will be. Groups of children on the play yards play "June Breakfast" in various forms throughout the school year. Words and ideas from the script appear and reappear in conversation and June Breakfast songs become a part of a permanent repertory. Costumes which are almost always clothes suitable for everyday wear, appear almost any day after the June Breakfast as a part of a school wardrobe. If costumes cannot be worn as a part of regular dress they appear at Halloween, the Carnival or at other dress-up occasions until they are worn out or are put away by mothers and carefully kept as mementos of childhood.

As soon as everyone has found his place in the program there is an air of excitement, an air of expectancy throughout the building, for each day brings a new development, a new creation. As soon as a costume is finished it is brought to school to be admired and modeled by its proud owner. Mothers volunteer to make costumes not only for their own children but for any others who might need help in making them. Many of the costumes are made at home, others are made at school where sewing machines and expert help are available for those who need assistance.

Shopkeepers send word of the kind and variety of merchandise they have on hand. Mothers and teachers go shopping to find materials and trimmings of just the right texture and design, or to locate the shops where the desired kind and color of slacks, shorts and shirts may be purchased. Parents, teachers and children willingly lend anything they have that may be needed for stage property—a velvet cape, an antique desk, a cherished doll. They bring baskets and armfuls of garden flowers so that the entire building may be dressed and waiting on June Breakfast morning.

Since the building is not large enough to accommodate all of the school family on the morning of the Breakfast, there are several other performances that all may come to see and to enjoy. Parents see their children in appealing situations, they see them in relationship to an artistic whole, and they themselves are caught up in an experience of beauty which lifts thinking and broadens horizons, an experience which heightens anticipation for another year.

Children Visit and Learn

So the Maury community comes to the school and the school, feeling at one with the community, goes out to meet it, to explore it, to learn from it.

The children of Maury School are young children and this stretching out to think of others cannot be stretched too far; it cannot be stretched to the point where it becomes symbolic rather than actual.

There are many trips to children's homes to admire a new brother or sister, to see a pet goat, to ride a new

pony. There are visits to inquire about sick classmates, to carry remembrances to those who are missed. The mother of a five-year-old wrote this letter to a teacher in Maury School:

Dear Miss T. . . . :

I wish you would express to the little children my appreciation for their interest shown for my birthday. It made me very happy when Linda came home with the basket and other things the children made.

It is the little things in life that count and an example of it was yesterday. Thank them for me.

Yours truly,

(Signed) Mrs. K. . . .

The fire engine house a few blocks from the school is a favorite visiting place for the younger children. After one of these visits a six-year-old wrote this letter to one of the firemen:

"Thank you for the suckers you gave us. Thank you for everything. I will look for you if our house catches on fire."

There are frequent shopping trips to the nearby business district to buy such things as a bolt for a wagon, a flower container or refreshments for a party. The merchants in the neighborhood are our friends: the florist who says that it gives him much pleasure to sell one rose to a child for his mother's or his teacher's birthday; the hardware merchant who gives the children wooden boxes whenever they need them; and the jeweler from whom the classes leaving Maury School each year purchase a silver spoon, the jeweler in turn giving spoons to be sold at the Carnival.

As meanings are deepened the community widens and there are trips far-

ther afield, to the Public Library, to museums, to radio stations, to the Children's Book Fair, to a hatchery in a distant part of the city, to a dairy farm several miles in the country. As children grow in maturity and are able to go back in time and space, there are trips to historical spots, not to illustrate what one may know by heart, but to give clearer perspective, to deepen awareness and sensitivity to other people, other places and other events. The children and the parents and the teachers who go with them see the place at Richmond on the James River where Captain John Smith claimed the land for King James of England. They visit the Capitol Square and the Capitol Building designed by Thomas Jefferson, rich in the traditions of the early days of our republic. They go to Saint John's Church and walk where Patrick Henry walked, and stand where Patrick Henry stood when he said, "Give me liberty or give me death." They see, and come to know and appreciate, the streets and the houses and the monuments that have become a part of the recorded history of our state and nation.

Community Groups Respond

That Maury School is one with its community is evidenced in ways that one may see and in ways that one may feel. The quick response of civic clubs, women's clubs, social agencies, educational groups and churches can always be counted upon when there is need for their services. In turn numerous requests for speeches and for advice come to the principal and other members of the staff from these agencies and institutions. The manager of a large manu-

faturing plant in the neighborhood has had three summer houses built on the Maury School yard and each year renews the striped awnings covering them. Several times during the year, by the request of its manager, exhibits from Maury School are set up in the foyer of a local bank.

Railroad tracks run close to Maury School. Some of the officials from the railroad, hearing that Maury had no large bell, offered to give one to the school. The big locomotive bell, cast in 1885, was brought to the school by representatives of the railroad. The school gathered to see the bell, to admire it, to ring it and to hear one of the officials from the railway tell of its history. He told of those who for many years had heard and loved the voice of the bell. He spoke of the romance that goes hand in hand with the pushing of steel rails across rivers and through mountains, and the opening of new frontiers. The bell has been placed on a pedestal on the school yard to be rung for each play period during the day and to celebrate special occasions. English ivy grows around its base and a chain hangs from it in easy reach of the youngest child for it is the children who ring it to call themselves to and from play.

Pattern of Warmth and Good Will

There are records to show the number of parents who come to Maury School each year for conferences with teachers, and records to show those who participate in the large school events. There is recorded evidence to show some of the ways in which the community has learned from the school. We know that many parents because of

the school have modified their ways of working with children. We know that there are now fewer children than formerly in Maury School who are underweight, fewer with physical defects. We know that every child has an adequate lunch, the majority of the children buying hot lunches at school. Lunches brought to school are no longer wrapped in newspapers but are well planned and pleasing to see. Children's clothes are better chosen, better made. There is less use of synthetic silk, more of durable cotton. The number of frizzy permanent waves in little girls' hair grows less each year. Clean, well-brushed, well-arranged, natural hair is a source of pride with many of our children. Parents whose qualities of leadership have been developed at Maury have gone out to assume leadership roles in other schools, in churches and in civic groups. Audiences at Maury School have undergone changes over the years. At Carnival Time when huge crowds are free to roam the building at will, there is no rowdyism, no destruction of property. The good-natured laugh, the friendly jostle is a common characteristic of the dense crowd. The June Breakfast program is not just a performance at which one applauds a song, a dance, a spoken word, but an experience characterized by the rapt look, the brushed tear.

There is tangible proof of the learnings that have been listed here but there are other learnings which do as surely exist of which there is no recording.

A mother of a six-year-old boy, new to the school, was not at first pleased with Maury and said so often. Her

little boy had a part in the June Breakfast that year. The mother came to the practice every day, watching intently, never saying a word. Near the beginning of the program were these lines:

Now is the time of planting.

Deep are the roots and kind is the earth

And strength to those who love it,
For the blossoms of the field are ours,
And we and the earth are one.

Children dressed as gardeners dug the earth and others as blossoms of the field became one with a growing world. On the day after the June Breakfast this mother was telling a teacher good-bye. She looked down at her child and said, "I have bought him a little shovel and a little hoe and he is going to dig in the ground this summer."

Believing as we do that as one lives, so does he learn, we do surely believe that the color, the light, the balance, the order, the way of living at Maury School becomes a part of those who come to it, and becoming a part, makes living better. Each time the school serves the community, each time the community serves the school, the threads that bind these two together become stronger, weaving a pattern of warmth and good will.

Eight-year-old Anne wrote this letter to a friend in another room:

Maury School
September 27, 1950

Dear Lily:

I have made an apron. It is blue, a pretty blue apron. I like it Lily. I will bring my apron home.

Love,

Anne

We do believe that they bring their learnings home.

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