

They Are Your Children. And Mine.

Paul Paparella

Silence filled the large auditorium as the eighth graders and their parents listened to the final phrases of their principal's graduation speech. Then, one by one, members of the audience began to applaud. Within seconds everyone stood, clapping and cheering in recognition of the address and the man who had given it.

We have all attended graduations, and some of us have spoken at them. This time both parents and students recognized that the speech was more than words; it was a reflection of a genuinely humanistic school and the leader who has helped make it a special place for young people. — Diane Gess, parent

They balance the Battle of Lexington on their laps, cradling matchstick forts and tin soldiers who march and drum to the rhythm of the bus. They spill from the bus, lacrosse sticks held high, hockey sticks searching for the elusive puck, bowling balls wrapped like giant eggs in cotton, water pistols leaking into pockets, firecrackers spilling powder into jacket linings, poison pen letters yellowing in their jeans, gum wrappers metamorphosed into bracelets, magic markers the color of graffiti, and an occasional book to betray their destination.

Who are they? They are your children. And mine. They look like us. They share our names. They carry our hopes and their dreams on shoulders more than a boy's, less than a man's, more than a girl's, less than a woman's.

They can bully and brag and be cruel. They can cry over a rumor, laugh uncontrollably over nothing, smile to cover their hurt, and amaze us at how quickly they can move from one emotion to another.

They run instead of walk, shout instead of whisper, forget their lunch, their money, their homework, all too often. The lost and found table groans under the weight of boots, sneakers, pocketbooks, retainers in plastic cups, sweaters, gym shorts, baseball gloves, jackets, notebooks, textbooks, but not one single example of that relic from our day—the earmuff. And they say times haven't changed.

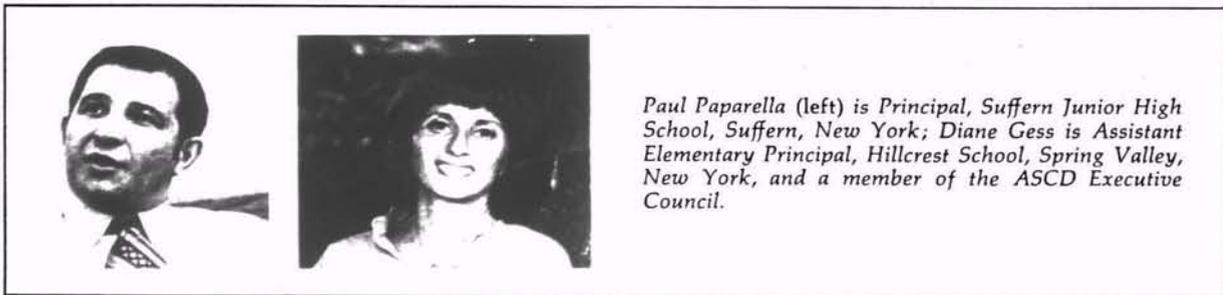
They carry enough collective wire in their mouths to tilt the world several more degrees off its axis. They can find a contact lens within a radius of a thousand feet and not be able to avoid that one wet spot in an empty hallway. They can sit absolutely silent in a crowded gymnasium when one of their peers attempts a dangerous stunt on the uneven bars. They can cook and sew, publish a newspaper, put together a yearbook, handle tools dangerous enough for a grownup, make the honor roll, come to school with a cold, catch the measles, lose their first fight, have their first boyfriend or girlfriend, flunk their first test, dissect their first anything, grow inches, gain pounds, and leave in two years in a different body from the one in which they entered. They spend their junior high years shedding the imposters who changed every second, every minute, every hour, every day, every month, searching constantly for their real selves.

They do get tired and hurt, and they need a kind word or look from us more often than you think. They will walk for any charity, bike in any bike-a-thon, drink more water than a camel, disco themselves into shin splints, and then come to physical education with a medical excuse. They will eat a potato chip and Dorito lunch, topped off by Italian ice and a Twinkie and six containers of chocolate milk. They store enough sandwiches in their lockers to feed a continent, and they have proved without a doubt that peanut butter does turn into stone when tucked away in a locker for six months. They slide down snowy hills on cafeteria trays, skateboard

themselves to class, never, never smoke but always hold a lit cigarette for a friend, never cut anything but a study hall, are sometimes truant from school (we called it playing hookey, and we always had our ear muffs on when we did it), lie, cheat, steal, forge notes and misspell their mother's first name, and use language fit to curl the ears of a C.B. antenna.

They play for our athletic teams in rain and snow, wallow in mud, and break bones—all in front of a very few people. They can play music with a talent beyond their years. They fit everything in among orthodontist appointments, religion classes, piano lessons, ballet lessons, gymnastic lessons, ice skating lessons, measles, mumps, chicken pox, family quarrels, family celebrations, and homework. They are not made of steel. They have serious illnesses, spend time in the hospital, and suffer from perhaps the most serious ailment for all for an adolescent, a broken heart. They experience family discord, family illness, and death in the family. They find comfort in a friend, support from peers, and, we hope, love and understanding from us.

Who are they? They are your children. And mine. They look like us. They share our names. And they will spend most of their lives away from our direct influence. But our indirect influence in the form of directions planted and love given will remain with them to comfort and guide them for the rest of their days. The greatest sign of a successful teacher or parent is not what the student or child did while in the classroom or in the home, but what he or she does with his or her life when we are a memory or a phone call away. May that memory never be too faint or that phone too busy.



Paul Paparella (left) is Principal, Suffern Junior High School, Suffern, New York; Diane Gess is Assistant Elementary Principal, Hillcrest School, Spring Valley, New York, and a member of the ASCD Executive Council.



"When I speak out for the rights of retarded people, I know what I'm talking about, because I'm one of them."

Michael is part of the Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development (A.C.R.M.D.), an organization that fights discrimination against retarded people. He has been their spokesman at many meetings.

Michael has managed to get jobs for a number of retarded people by talking directly to politicians. They call the A.C.R.M.D. and say that a young man from your organization spoke up and we're interested in hiring someone.

Michael is one of the first retarded people to work full time for the Federal Government. After he was on the job a few years they gave him a special citation for improving the efficiency of the office.

"I had the idea of using a less expensive paper for the office copying machines. It saves the government thousands of dollars a year."

Michael says that the determination of the handicapped to prove themselves capable of doing a job well and thoroughly is the best argument for hiring them.

President's Committee on
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