

# Sign of Our Time

It's natural to feel like fighting back when students criticize or challenge us, but we must not let defensiveness blind us to the need for change.



LOUIS I. POLLOCK

Prominently posted on bulletin boards, the signs greeted me—just as they would greet next week's returning students—as I joined the rest of our faculty for the first back-to-school meeting of the year:

**IF YOU THINK HIGH SCHOOL IS BORING, WAIT TILL YOU SIT AROUND IN AN UNEMPLOYMENT OFFICE.**

The bold, black letters on fuchsia posterboard left no room for misinterpretation: "No matter how bad it might seem in here," it would assure students, "there will always be something worse out there." Teachers were enthusiastic about the sign and, following the meeting, eagerly took copies of it to post in their classrooms.

The sign's message disturbed me, however, because it seemed to reflect a need of frustrated teachers to tell students that, like us or not, we don't need to change. And it added an unspoken, "So there!" The sign provided a simple rationale for the educational status quo.

## The Educator's Achilles Heel

It also provided a group-sanctioned response for teachers who have faced two decades of student unrest, public apathy, and diminishing fiscal resources. The urge to fight back against charges of boredom is especially understandable, because few criticisms hurt educators more than being called dull. Teacher sensitivity to this issue was pointed out by John Goodlad, who noted that teachers most frequently cite lack of student interest as the greatest problem facing American high schools.<sup>1</sup>

Teachers' readiness to fight back was apparent in that first faculty meeting. The staff applauded the announcement of new legislation in California that no longer requires teachers to provide make-up work for students suspended from school. Again, the teachers seemed to welcome the chance to say "So there!" to disobedient students.

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### "Unacceptable" Emotions

I doubt that the teachers gathered in that room would—or could—acknowledge their hostile feelings. Such emotions are foreign to the image of the caring teacher, but the truth is that all educators possess a full range of human emotions, including anger. By not admitting the anger we sometimes feel toward students, or toward an apathetic public, we deceive and restrict ourselves.

We justify denying make-up work to suspended students in order to teach them the value of following the rules; and we take pride in our new, tough discipline policies. The anger we feel toward students who disobey us, who violate our rules, finds expression in excessive disciplinary practices couched in "goodness and compassion." We say, simply, that it is for their own good. We also feel hurt and angry when students call our lessons boring, so we magnani-

mously post signs to warn them of the greater boredom of an unemployment office. These practices tragically blind us to much needed innovation and creativity.<sup>2</sup> Terry Colvin, declaring the need for school reform, wrote, "Techniques must be found to inspire and stimulate the creative energies of students and teachers, who now agree on one thing: Schools are boring."<sup>3</sup>

### Accepting Anger

As more attention is focused on school improvement, it is important that educators remain open and not succumb to defensiveness. A first step is to recognize and deal with the whole range of emotions we experience—including the negative ones we sometimes feel toward our students. When we can accept being angry at them for violating our rules, we will be free to create discipline tech-

niques designed to inspire student growth and success rather than to reassert our power. When we can admit to being hurt when students call us boring, we won't need to justify our classroom environments with slogans printed on hot pink signs. The truth is that students neither have to sit in employment offices nor boring classrooms. As we accept the new challenge for educational growth and improvement, we must remain open to an entire spectrum of possibilities. □

<sup>1</sup>John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

<sup>2</sup>Esther P. Rothman, *Troubled Teachers* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977): p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Terry L. Colvin, "Three R's Get a Fourth—Reform!" *San Diego Union*, September 11, 1983, p. A-8.

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