

# More Than Singing, More Than Words

Brief morning meetings at which everyone sings have made the Townshend (Vermont) Elementary School a happy and productive place.



*Singing together may not be a magic wand, but it encourages togetherness and therefore contributes to a climate for school improvement.*

Photographs by Esther LaMoria

Entering the front door of the Townshend Elementary School at eight o'clock any schoolday morning, you are certain to be inspired by the sights and sounds that greet you. The entire school population is gathered in the entry hall and on the stairways that lead to the second floor classrooms. The joyful sound of children and adults singing together fills the hall.

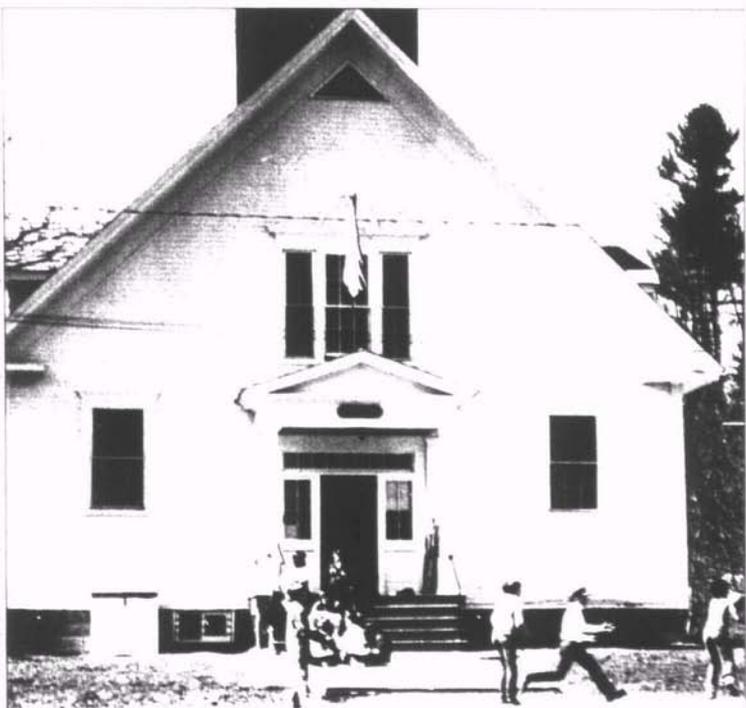
As you watch and listen, you will detect enthusiasm and cooperation ringing through the tunes and the words of the songs. When the group disassembles and children proceed to their classrooms, the involuntary tapping of your toe and the melody lilting through your head will tell you that the tone of the day has been set and the harmony will linger.

What you have just heard is more than perfunctory singing. This music is a celebration of life, of learning, and of love and friendship. It is an expression of the strength and joy that come from working together in an atmosphere of mutual respect, a remarkable chemistry that has produced positive charges throughout our school, almost electric in the way they connect the people and brighten the day.

### **A Daily Celebration**

Singing together every morning is the result of a brainstorming session at the 1983-84 preschool staff meeting. The topic of discussion was school climate. How could we make it better? How could we turn this school into a community of learners and teachers? We wanted to do something to start each day on a happy note and to teach by example the values of respect, rights, and responsibility to our students.

The first of these meetings took place on the first day of school in September 1983. The idea was an instant success with our community. Parents who delivered their children to school stayed for the meeting. Classroom aides and special instructors arrived early so they could participate. Neighbors and storekeepers came out



*On the edge of the village common, Townshend Elementary School invites parents, neighbors, shopkeepers, special teachers, and aides to join 85-100 students in singing to start the day.*

onto their porches and sidewalks to hear us.

The singing was not such an instant success with our fifth- and sixth-grade boys. They were tolerant, but they were not participating. We decided to have each fifth- and sixth-grade student sign up for a day as co-leader of the meeting. If they would have us sing, they chose the songs. If they would not have us sing, they selected and led the alternatives, such as posing riddles, reciting poems, and asking trivia questions. As time went on, more and more students were choosing to have us sing. When the leader's choice was other than singing, the other students were requesting that we sing, in addition to the leader's activity. We honored those requests. Before all the fifth- and sixth-grade students had enjoyed the opportunity to be "meeting leaders," third- and

fourth-graders were clamoring for a turn.

Now everyone is so much a part of this daily celebration that the real leadership is established on a moment-to-moment basis. There is no tension about who is in control. The spirit and focus of the singing is to enjoy that time together and to reestablish each morning the oneness that has made this school a community rather than a collection of classrooms.

The meetings begin with the Pledge of Allegiance and a patriotic song. There is a time for making announcements, greeting guests, celebrating birthdays, and recognizing achievements, or extending thank-yous. When necessary, there is time to discuss any problems we may have. But that is rare; the mood is upbeat. The meetings last about 20 minutes and always end with group singing.



*On the sunlit steps of their school, two girls share music and reading in easy companionship.*

### **Academic and Social Outcomes**

During the past three years noticeable and notable changes have occurred at our school. Both the academic and social climate are different, and these changes seem to be related to our singing together every morning.

The academic changes include better work habits, more self-motivation, and a greater sense of personal responsibility among the students. Also, we have seen new interest in and appreciation for all the language arts. Reading and writing have become favored free-time activities. After all, singing, reading, and writing have strong natural connections. Also, since the songs generate interest in the con-

texts they came from, social studies has been enhanced and enriched through our emphasis on music.

The social changes have been even more obvious. There have been no fist fights, unacceptable language is not heard, and graffiti has not been found anywhere in or on the school. Once common, these behaviors had been thought of as inevitable.

If we could define the new climate of the Townshend School in one word, that word would be *respect*. This respect is demonstrated in the warm manner in which students and teachers speak to each other, listen to each other, and respond to each other. It can be seen in the comfortable way they work together and play together.

### **Blue Sky and Sunshine**

To suggest or infer that singing together every morning is a magic wand for school improvement would, of course, be gross oversimplification and an injustice to the dedication and creative thinking that have made our school special. If, however, you can imagine the school as a collage, then singing together every morning would be for our students the blue sky and sunshine and for the teachers the glue that holds the pieces in place. □

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