

Voices

The Superintendent

JAMES H. VANSCIVER

More Than Paint

Paint was the focus of a recent dialogue between students at Lake Forest High School in Harrington, Delaware, and the school district's central administration. The true significance of the dialogue went far beyond paint, however; student attitudes toward themselves, their school, and their community were the real issue.

Years ago, students at the school used to paint graffiti on an old barn on the school grounds. The graffiti was not profane or vulgar but an expression of school spirit. In time the barn became unsafe and was removed. Students then began painting on a narrow stretch of blacktop that winds its way past the school.

The central administration took a stand against painting on the road, for a number of compelling reasons: the paint made a negative impression on visitors to the area; the paint had begun to find its way onto nearby telephone poles and traffic signs; the paint

could pose a safety hazard to the motorists who used the road.

The issue was one of recognizing right and wrong and acting accordingly. If painting on the road was wrong, then what were the students going to do about it? Students' attitudes were disturbing, at first. "It's not wrong unless I get caught," said several. This philosophy seemed to echo off the walls of the classrooms in which the debate took place.

At central office we tried to emphasize the reasons for our decision, to explore the potential for values clarification in the experience, and to transfer the dialogue to other examples in the school and in the community.

Both students and administrators had choices to make. Did student leaders want to be remembered as the ones who lost the right of painting on the road or as the ones who recognized that painting on the road was wrong and did something about it? The administration had to develop op-

tions. If students were asked not to paint on the road, where *could* they express their school spirit?

Students suggested erecting a billboard for graffiti. If it were large and low to the ground, a billboard could provide ample room for the school's free spirits to display their artistic talents. Local businesses donated materials and labor, and a 10' x 50' billboard was erected. Now it is a living art form; the paint on it changes almost daily.

Will students transfer this problem-solving attitude to other facets of their lives? Only time will tell. But this dialogue served to raise fundamental questions concerning the choices we have in school systems and in our communities. Our choices involve much more than paint on the road. □

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The Teacher

GRETCHEN SCHWARZ

The Importance of Being Silly

Schooling these days is a very earnest endeavor. Seldom does the topic of humor appear in the professional literature or media reports, and rarely can "joking around" be found as the subject of an inservice session or a conference. We are all busy training to be more effective teachers, improving test scores, and increasing time-on-task. After all, humor cannot usually be prescribed in a behavioral objective, nor can it be evaluated statistically.

Yet humor remains one of our most powerful tools—for learning and teaching. It is important to take time for fun, for play, for laughter. From Bruno Bettelheim (1987), who has argued that play is essential to children's development, to Norman Cousins (1979), who

prescribed laughter as a cure for disease in *Anatomy of an Illness*, a few contemporary thinkers do take fun seriously. In the April 1984 *Educational Leadership* article "Laughing With Children," Vincent Rogers discusses Cousins' book and the physical benefits of laughter; he even suggests ways that teachers can encourage humor in their classrooms. In *Learning Through Laughter: Humor in the Classroom*, Claudia Cornett (1986) lists 13 reasons why humor is important for students. Her rationale includes improving their self-image and motivating them to read more. She also suggests more specific applications:

Laughter's relaxation possibilities have direct relevance for many stressful school

situations, such as test taking . . . Next to test taking, one of the tensest situations in a classroom is . . . some kind of disruption . . .

Often gentle teasing can accomplish more than a vicious scolding. A smile can be a powerful reinforcer (p. 15).

Most important, our own experiences tell us that laughter can accomplish much. We have all seen a diverse class become a functioning, productive group, because students laugh together and enjoy one another. We've seen "Charlie," the attention-seeking potential problem, become a source of motivation and a leader in engaging other students with the subject, because we allow him class clown status. A classroom characterized by frequent laughter, even at the teacher's mistakes, is a safe classroom in which

students feel free to try new things. This becomes especially clear in a foreign language classroom, where students publicly have to produce strange sounds and connect new words in unusual ways. If it's OK to laugh at ourselves or at life's absurdities, then it's not so embarrassing to try to speak a foreign language, defend a political opinion, or suggest a poem interpretation.

In addition to helping students and teachers establish rapport, perhaps the greatest benefit of humor is that it can promote creativity. Avner Ziv (1983) reports the results of two studies that "clearly indicate that a humorous atmosphere influences students' scores on divergent thinking" (p. 73). Laughter can free students to experiment

with different perspectives, to step back from a problem in order to solve it, and to generate nonconventional thinking. And finally, of course, the importance of laughter outside the classroom in maintaining teacher sanity is a story in itself . . .

One of the most disturbing observations of American schools made by John Goodlad (1984) in *A Place Called School* is that "less than 3 percent of classroom time was devoted to praise, abrasive comments, expressions of joy or humor, or somewhat unbridled outbursts such as 'wow' or 'great' . . ." (p. 230). Laughter need not be a waste of time; it can be a sign of life in school. In striving for academic excellence, we should not lose a sense of humor. □

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