

them to establish their identities within their own ethnic contexts *and* to understand culture contexts outside their immediate spheres of experience. As schools seek means to help students shape their own identities, it is, therefore, more important to look around and ahead in literature than to look only backward. □

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Voices

The Principal

BRUCE CONRAD DAVIS

A Consensus on Christmas

"We should junk our Christmas program and have a Winter Festival instead. The people coming into this school don't celebrate Christmas anyhow." That proposal came from a teacher on my staff, and a few others said, "Amen." The ball was now in my court, and I didn't know quite what to do.

Our school population is described as low socioeconomic. The students represent 19 different languages, and 44 percent are limited-English-speaking. Thirty-eight percent of our families are receiving financial assistance. The enrollment is nearly evenly divided between Latin and Asian students. The major languages are English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and several different Chinese dialects.

Since I believe we work for the parents, my response was that I would ask the parents for their reactions to this proposal at the next School Advisory Committee meeting. The "hallelujah quartet," I knew, wouldn't be thrilled with this idea, but then again what could they do? We are working for the parents and children.

At the SAC meeting, I presented both sides of the issue and asked the parents for their thoughts. A Chinese man, a recent immigrant, stood up and spoke, "We should continue to have

the traditional Christmas program. That is what you do in this country, and we want to be part of what is done in this country. We want to learn your customs."

All right, I thought. This is working out better than I could have hoped for. Just then, a parent from Mexico arose and faced the Chinese gentleman.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes, I do."

The audience applauded vigorously. The parents gave unanimous approval for continuing our Christmas program traditions. I reported back to the staff that the Christmas carols would continue.

All principals know that parental support is of critical importance. We keep that support level at high tide by giving parents a chance to sound off. People like to offer their opinions, and we give them a chance to do so.

We also weave in a few twists that increase our level of parent support. Each spring I send a letter, translated into four languages, to all of the parents of the 650 students in our school. I ask them to write back, in their native language if they prefer, and let me know what they like and dislike about my service as principal. They can include remarks about other subjects, but most stick to the topic. The responses

(60-67 percent respond) are translated and sorted according to language. They are three-hole punched and placed in a binder and indexed by language. I give copies to the board of education and the superintendent. I review the letters and report back to the parents, again in the four languages, letting them know that I've acknowledged their concerns and criticisms.

If there's something I can do to remedy their complaints, I tell them about my plans for action. If there is nothing I can do, I tell them why. When I make the corrections they suggest, I let them all know, again, in the four major languages.

This approach strengthens the dialogue between the home and the school. It shows an ethnically disparate population that they have more common denominators than they may have imagined. Perhaps this is why it's normal for us to have 150 to 200 parents attend our 8:30 a.m. parent meetings. We never forget that we work for the parents. We treat them as equals and set high standards for them as well as for our students—and this makes us all want to "measure up." □

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