

## An Elementary School Meets the Challenge of Consolidation

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*In Early Years*

THE William O. Schaefer Elementary School is located in Tappan, New York, a suburb 15 miles north of Manhattan which has seen two reorganization plans in the last seven years and the closing of half the district's schools. Schaefer now receives all of the district's K-4 pupils. Two years ago, Schaefer faced the challenge of taking youngsters from three small neighborhood schools which contained diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and building a single, cohesive, effective school. Staff have come up with a multifaceted program that keeps the school charged with vitality and enthusiasm. Several programs are underway, enabling school staff to identify with and assume leadership in the components which suit them best.

A carefully developed program makes fairness a key to all that goes on in the school. The key premises are that deliberately focused attention on civic ethics generates an exemplary learning climate and working environment, that it is an excellent way to teach children some vital concepts and principles, and that such a focus helps youngsters achieve both moral and cognitive growth.

One means for focusing attention on civic ethics are the three student advisory councils (SACs)—one for K-1, one for grades 2 and 3, and one for grade 4. Each council meets separately with the principal on a biweekly basis. Each classroom has two SAC delegates, one elected and one chosen for any of a wide variety of purposes (e.g., to help a shy child get in the swim of things, to provide recognition for a youngster who needs it, to encourage and build on leadership potential). The purpose of the SACs is, as one youngster said, "to talk about problems and help people to solve them."

At each meeting, delegates are asked to report problems they have seen or experienced, to offer suggestions for dealing with problems the principal brings to the meeting, to look at "Maslow charts" (which list some of the needs the psycholo-

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gist found basic), and to respond to whether and where changes are needed to better meet student needs. The SACs are not decision-making bodies, and the principal handles different problems in different ways. A number of the problems presented by both students and principal are referred to delegates' classrooms for discussion. In this way, the rest of the school is also drawn into fairness discussions.

### Extending Fairness

Students disciplined by the principal have the right to petition her formally to hear an appeal and reconsider, to request that she discuss the matter with their parents, or to take the situation to a student fact-finding board for due process. The board cannot reverse the principal's decision (none of this machinery is construed as student *governance* bodies, but as educational vehicles); but it does issue a due process decision that indicates whether the student has been treated fairly. Thus, there are protections for students, and capricious punishments could not be kept a secret. Consequently, fairness extends to the way children are treated by the school, as well as to the way in which they treat one another.

The fairness program aims at initial understandings and appreciations of the ideas of authority, justice, freedom, responsibility, privacy, property, participation, diversity, equality, and power. It thus seeks to begin serious instruction in civic morality with five-year-olds,

and to expand and refine such learnings throughout the years each child is in the school.

A major factor in getting even very young children to think seriously about such ideas has been to personify and symbolize them in Theodore Fair Bear. The principal took young children's interest in animals, combined it with their need to have abstractions made concrete, and came up with Theodore—a giant teddy bear whose official history is that the principal found him sobbing on a park bench, distraught over the difficulty of finding a fair place to live. Informed about the school, he decided to give it a try, hoping he had found a place where people try to be fair with each other.

He appears to be satisfied and has become a much loved character. His home is in the library, but he attends all due process meetings and visits classrooms. He is also available for birthday parties, baseball games, and skating parties. Weekends, he usually signs out with pupils to visit in one of the "fair" homes in the community.

His contribution to school life is evident in other ways, too. A kindergarten teacher tells a story of a child who was upset, grumbling, angry, and uncooperative. She refused to confide in her teacher but said she wanted to talk with Theodore. She nestled close to his ear, and with gestures explained her troubled world. In a few minutes, she returned to her teacher with a smile, and in her usual happy, gen-

tle way, she explained, "Everything is all right now; Theodore always understands."

A humanities program designed for grades 2, 3, and 4 exposes the children one time each week to selected masterpieces of prose, poetry, painting, and music. It is designed to generate esthetic awareness, literacy, and appreciation—through having youngsters explore manifestations of goodness, trust, beauty, justice, and truth. The youngsters deal explicitly, too, with these concepts—with even second-graders tackling the question, "What is beauty?" at an initial level.

The humanities program also attempts to deal with and relate to these five abstractions, almost all of the same concepts that the fairness program emphasizes. Thus, in a different context, with a different teacher, and using different materials, the youngsters begin to see that the fairness question is ubiquitous—and that great minds have wrestled with it throughout history. In this way, also, the total school program takes on consistency and coherence.

The humanities program is extended and supplemented for gifted youngsters by a specialist who spends 80 days of the school year at Schaefer. She works largely with staff in helping them to identify talent and giftedness and to develop it with youngsters. She does occasional demonstration lessons—not only to show how to generate and pose appropriately challenging questions from literature or social

studies, but also to enable the classroom teacher to study her own group's responses from the vantage point of an observer. After such demonstrations, consultant and teacher plan follow-up work for these youngsters. The gifted education consultant is also working with the librarian and a small group of teachers on a project intended to link basic skills instruction to some of the purposes being pursued in the humanities program.

### Computer Education

The school staff have also made a major commitment to computer education. Every classroom has a computer, with two in fourth-grade classrooms. Even kindergartners begin computer games, acquiring ease and confidence with the equipment. Computer-made pattern "pictures" adorn many classrooms, and youngsters quite casually include computer activities as part of their daily fare.

A teacher/computer specialist works closely with each classroom teacher on the use of the computers and has also designed the school's computer center. Careful coordination with classroom teachers has made it possible to use the computers in direct connection with classroom work. A fifth of the school's pupil population is involved in computer-assisted instruction (CAI), working on programs which provide remedial and enrichment work.

The children enter the computer center according to their classrooms

and the gifted sit side by side with those needing extra help, with the two groups working on very different programs. (Each youngster types his name onto the computer keyboard to summon the particular program the homebase teacher has planned.) There are also special programs for learning-disabled youngsters. And all second-, third-, and fourth-graders who are not involved in CAI pursue a computer literacy program.

A teacher will bring small groups to the center and work directly with them on a computer reserved for that purpose. Other teachers who want to depend more extensively on the center's teacher/specialist are able to do so—without sacrificing any of their class's opportunities. In this way, the school is able to pursue the advantages of specialists and expertise while retaining the strengths of the self-contained classroom in which one teacher comes to know and work closely with one group of youngsters.

### Reading Program

In a new reading program at the school, work is underway to supplement—and at least partially replace—with other reading materials—the basal reader series, which the staff considers insufficiently challenging to youngsters' comprehension abilities. Staff members are working up collections of materials to offset such limitations. Many will also tie in to the fairness program while extending basic reading and thinking skills. And a

number may well be associated with the humanities program. The current focus in this program is on "Concepts and Issues," and materials are being collected that will have third-graders reading about ecology and consumerism. There is also a growing literature collection on heroes, and great interest in having youngsters see the differences in the heroes of the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.

These programs are part of what yields the excitement a visitor quickly catches in the classrooms at Schaefer. Another major dimension that explains the commitment of pupils and staff is the subtle but clearly evident climate or ethos that pervades the school. Youngsters come to experience all of the school as a safe and supportive community. Staff pride and enthusiasm are evident. It seems a happy school as well as an exciting one—where children are *helped* as well as *challenged* to do their very best.

It is not idyllic. The principal reports horrendous scheduling problems in dovetailing all of the program elements. And staff sometimes find space confining in frustrating ways. Yet, as the principal puts it, "Schaefer is testimony to the power of people: competent staff; concerned, thoughtful parents and community; a rational and promise-keeping superintendent; and a board of education which sets aside differences to create a community norm that only the best is good enough for the children and ourselves."