

Playing Within The Rules

Rod Johnson

There has been, and continues to be, much controversy regarding the topic of buying and selling pollution allowances. Students and teachers at Glens Falls Middle School (GFMS) are well aware of the differences of opinion and respect the various points of view. We have not, however, allowed ourselves to become paralyzed into inaction. We have forged ahead and *played within the rules*.

What exactly does playing within the rules mean? During the 1993-1994 school year sixth grade students began learning more about the problem of acid rain. Our studies were guided by the National Geographic Society KIDSNET program. We learned about the causes of acid precipitation and conducted tests to determine the acidity of precipitation falling in the city of Glens Falls, which is located at the southeastern corner of the Adirondack Park. We were all quite dismayed when the most common pH was found to be about 4.5. This is at least ten times more acidic than the benchmark used by the National Geographic Society for acid rain, 5.6 pH.

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It wasn't until the '94-'95 school year that we heard about "pollution allowances." Once again we were completing our acid rain unit, when coincidentally, an article written by *Post Star* reporter, Fred Daley, appeared in our local paper. The article explained in detail about the concept of "the right to pollute" being sold at public auction. The Chicago Board of Trade conducts an annual auction on behalf of the Environmental Protection Agency where the rights to emit

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sulfur dioxide can be purchased. Almost immediately, the concept of playing within the rules came to mind.

Fred provided the information we hadn't known we were looking for. We now had a vehicle to move us from problem identifiers to problem solvers. We knew that acid rain was very real. Our testing proved it. What if we raised some money and placed a

bid at the 1995 auction? The *Post Star* article stated that the auction was "public"; that is, anyone could participate. An environmental clearinghouse known as INHALE (National Healthy Air License Exchange) was mentioned as an organization able to serve as facilitator for concerned citizens wanting to get involved. Our next course of action was to call the listed toll-free number: 1-800-2-BUY-AIR.

Dan Jaffe, Executive Director of INHALE, answered the phone and a wonderful partnership began. Dan assured us that our students could place a bid for pollution allowances; however, there was one catch. The kids had to raise the money to pay the EPA if their bid was successful. Dan told us the deadline for placement of our bid and encouraged our effort. Little did we know the far reaching effects our project would have.

In '95 the sixth grade classes at GFMS raised \$3200 in about five weeks. Students held bake sales; solicited parents, friends and neighbors; spoke to the PTSA, the Board of Education, and civic groups; and donated their own extra coins. In March we sent our check out to

INHALE, hoping for the best. A bid of \$152 per allowance was submitted and it cleared, i.e., was successful. We were able to purchase the right to emit 21 TONS of sulfur dioxide emissions. Since we were approaching the auction from an environmentalist's point of view, we "retired" our allowances or permits into a special account held by the EPA called the Glens Falls Middle School Clean Air Preserve. In effect we eliminated 21 tons of sulfur dioxide emissions from ever being released into the atmosphere. *Playing within the rules*, we felt we had made a small difference.

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The story doesn't end there. As it turns out, GFMS was the only public school in the nation to participate in the auction. This turned out to be big news; BIG NEWS! Almost immediately local and national media picked up the story. GFMS's small purchase had a huge impact. As a result, the story has been told on *The Mike and Maty* TV show, *The Charles Osgood Files* on CBS radio, Nick-

elodeon's *Nick News* with Linda Ellerbee, National Public Radio (5 separate stations), by *National Geographic World*, and *REACT*, a special edition of *Parade Magazine*. Countless other newspapers and trade journals have also carried the story.

As the 1995 school year came to a close, the GFMS community felt great pride. The acid rain project had been a success. But then, 1996 loomed in the not so distant future. Could we, should we, would we try to do better? After much soul searching, it was determined that the entire school would get behind the acid rain fund raising project. We hoped to double the amount of money raised to approximately \$6000. Once again we were in for a big surprise. Using the knowledge gained in the previous year, a three phase plan was developed: Phase 1, a letter writing campaign which generated about \$4000; Phase 2, traditional school-wide fund raising activities during a two week period which raised about \$2800; and Phase 3, a live, community auction for adults which raised about \$13,700. Incredible results by any standard. In March of 1996, the Glens Falls Middle School Clean Air Preserve placed its bid at \$70.01 per allowance. We felt this would be close to the clearing price, yet high enough to be successful. Once again our bid cleared, and we used \$20,500 to retire 292 TONS of sulfur dioxide pollution allowances.

GFMS will continue to study the acid rain problem and be involved in finding viable solutions

which will ultimately improve our environment and the quality of our lives. Responsibility for the major fund raising effort pursued during the last two years has

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been passed on to the Schenectady City Schools under the direction of Anne Bower. We will support their efforts and wish them well.

Playing within the rules has provided the students at GFMS a tremendous learning opportunity. Students have learned that a small group of people, working together, can make a difference. Isn't that one of the things that has made America the greatest country in the world? □

