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From Ivory Tower to Ivory Foxhole in One Year

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I didn't start out in education as a junior high school administrator and I do not intend to end my educational involvement there either!

Once upon a time, I was 13 years of age, and an adolescent. I was in junior high school and did not realize that it was a difficult time. Several years later I was a teacher in a junior high school, but I did not observe then that there were great problems among the students that I met each day. I had fun with them, in fact.

During a two and one half year sojourn in graduate studies pursuing a doctorate, I became more intensely aware of the gap that existed between teachers and students, but more importantly, between university professors and elementary and secondary schools.

I guess that professors are supposed to profess. Most do that well but all too often I feel that what they are professing may be either out-dated or less than relevant to the needs of the students to whom they are professing.

That is to say that those of us engaged in the preparation of elementary and secondary teachers, counselors, and administrators may not be totally in touch with what is happening on a day-to-day basis in those elementary and secondary schools in which our students will ultimately work. Ah, yes, we visit classrooms while observing student teachers, we visit administrators both in and out of their schools, and we attend meetings and conventions to learn about what's happening "out there" but each of those

exposures is something less than the real thing and often somewhat unreal compared to what teachers, counselors and administrators actually face.

After promising myself nearly eight years ago that I would not lose touch with that part of the educational world, I worked diligently each year while on the university faculty to maintain constant contact with the schools in the area and in the state. I made it my business to keep in touch with those educators "out there" through meeting and conference attendance, supervising student teachers, visiting schools under the auspices of accreditation through North Central Association, working closely with the principals' association and working with a variety of committees and projects involving different individuals engaged directly with the teaching of elementary and secondary school students.

I often looked into the mirror and tried to convince the person looking at me that he was doing an absolutely magnificent job of keeping in touch with those who really counted in my business---preparing secondary school teachers and administrators. I think that there must have been some time, in fact, when I was persuaded that no one in the entire university was doing as much as I, nor having as much impact on the relationships between the university and the schools of the state.

Throughout the seven years between the completion of my doctorate and last year (1978), I continually gave lip service to wanting to get back into the public school so that I could touch base with what I referred to as the "real world" of education. In fact, I more than half-heartedly searched for an opportunity to move into a high school principalship for a one-year appointment, and I kept my attention directed towards those schools whose principal had decided to take a year to return to the university for additional study, in the hope that I might arrange some sort of switch for such a period of time. No one really encouraged that kind of arrangement; no one actually discouraged it, but the

"problems" that such an arrangement would make for the university took the form of discouragement.

There were times when I was ready to scrap the idea, but they were intermixed with other times when I was determined to do it, if for no other reason than to prove that it could be done and be measured as successful.

In the spring of 1978, an opportunity arose in Stillwater, Minnesota. A friend of several years, who is assistant superintendent for secondary education in the school district, knew that I had an interest in a one-year principalship. A junior high school principal in his district had been granted a sabbatical leave to attend the University of Minnesota in the quest for the doctorate. Since he was intending to return at the end of the year, the district wished to fill the position for one year only. Would I be interested?

We discussed the situation, the district, the school, and I considered it. When I had decided that it provided a good opportunity to keep an earlier promise, and to simultaneously update my own skills and knowledge of secondary administration, I made formal application for the position.

By the time I had done that, however, the current assistant principal had been given to believe that he'd be appointed to the principalship, and was so named. I had to decide if I would be equally willing to function as the assistant principal. After brief consideration I said that I would and I was subsequently offered the job.

Effective August 14, 1978 I officially became assistant principal of Oak-Land Junior High School in Stillwater, Minnesota and was under contract through June 29, 1979, I arranged with my dean and my department to be away from the university for the academic year, with the promise that if they'd allow me to be gone I would teach the Saturday course to which I'd already been scheduled, thereby not creating

a disruption in the schedule of classes being offered either on or off campus. What appeared to be a satisfactory situation was arranged and I went forth for my "year in the trenches."

After spending a year away from the university functioning as a junior high school administrator, I feel compelled to relate that I have a new awareness of the public secondary school--one, in fact, that I'd never before known.

Without a doubt, the myriad of contacts that I had kept with teachers and administrators in the schools was valuable but it was definitely far, far away from being there every day, all day, and seeing, hearing, feeling the inner machinery of the junior high school at work.

I would compare my earlier contacts as a university professor with some form of surgery. As a professor I was able to frequently see the illnesses of the school and often see the stitches and the scars from the operation, but seldom did I view the actual surgery with the blood and torn skin as I have done by being in the junior high school from 7 A.M. until 4:30 P.M. Monday through Friday. It's different and no one can convince me to the contrary. The old saying that "you have to be there to appreciate it" is real. Hearing a description of a sunset, or seeing a photograph of a sunset is not the same as actually seeing it. And so it has been for me this past school year.

I had a good year. It was an enjoyable one for me professionally and even I have no idea about how it might affect me and my involvement with preparation programs for future secondary school administrators.

This I do know--the credibility that I presently have with principals and superintendents in local schools is remarkable. No longer are they saying that I don't really know what school is like now, since I haven't been there for several years. I

have been there! They seem to appreciate having someone from the "Ivory Tower" come down and rub his nose in the dirt.

In spite of the fact that I say that the year was a good one, there were some aspects that were quite unenjoyable too. But I really do not wish to dwell on that, since we all understand that every job has its drawbacks from time to time.

The school in which I worked enrolled 1215 students in grades 7-9. The school building is some 12 years old and is located 8 or 9 miles southwest of the city of Stillwater. The facilities are outstanding, including an olympic-sized swimming pool, a football field circled by a track, three tennis courts, two hockey rinks, three basketball courts and three soccer fields. There is an auditorium with a capacity of 415, a library capable of seating over 100, adequate classroom space and home economics and industrial arts laboratory spaces to accommodate a somewhat broad junior high school curriculum.

Oak-Land Junior High School had an instructional staff of 76 teachers, a full time equivalent of 3.8 counselors in 5 different people, a full time librarian with two full time aides, a part time nurse with full time aide, a full time audio-visual director, a principal and myself. In the category of special services, Oak-Land housed all EMR junior high school students in the district, for which there were two teachers. There were 2.6 LD teachers, a half time speech therapist and a school psychologist one day a week.

For a junior high school, the curriculum was broad, including electives in three foreign languages, art, industrial arts, home economics, speech, drama, debate, band, chorus, orchestra, agriculture and a three-tiered mathematics program.

At this time I would like to share some general thoughts that grew out of my experience at Oak-Land.

I have often wondered if there was some magic size to a school, a school district, a classroom. I know, for instance, that teachers--in their bargaining--often negotiate class size. So far I have seen little evidence to indicate that class size is a predictor of student achievement or lack of it. Likewise, there seems to be little evidence that speaks to an optimum school size.

Whether 1215 students is a good size for a school or whether 900 students or 1500 students would be better, I do not know. What I feel, though, is that 1200 students (whose ages range from 13 to 15 years) is too many. There are very few 15 year olds who possess the maturity which is consistent enough to provide good, continuous leadership. The role models are not among the best, and the sheer number of students results in a counter-productive situation the greater part of the time.

Students at this age are active. They are physical. They are generally boisterous, and I note among them what seems to be growing belligerence and defiance. The larger the student population the more accentuated these characteristics become. The general demeanor of students seems to deteriorate as the numbers are increased.

I am not wishing to say--nor even to imply--that the kids are not good kids. Quite the contrary, in fact, because one-on-one every student with whom I worked was a good person. There is strength in numbers, and for the most part, I saw this age group functioning from the basis of numbers. Each wanted to be an individual but instead sacrificed individuality for peer acceptance and that peer acceptance became a compromise of individual principle which led to more undesirable behavior, additional belligerence and defiance and a penchant for destruction and violence. In short, the undesirable behavior became the desired behavior; the unpopular actions became the popular actions; the unacceptable became the acceptable.

Concomitant with this attitude was a morality that dictated that no one "narc", a term originally used to describe an informer for a narcotics agent. Most students seemed to be willing to take the rap, or the brunt of any punishment for something rather than to "narc" on the responsible party. Since this age group, especially the males, are quite physical, there may be good reason not to "narc" since the threat of being beaten up is real, even though more often than not, it is only an implied threat. A strong bond of apparent friendship exists, even among those who are not at all friendly with one another. I found few exceptions to the unwritten code against "narcing" which appears to permeate this age group.

In contrast, however, there are always a few students (typically from among the leaders in the school) who are willing to assume proper responsibility and will provide considerable information so long as there is assurance that they will in no way be linked with the source of the information.

I question whether students at this age have any idea of the seriousness of some of their actions. If they did, many of them would demonstrate more responsible behavior than is often the case. The following incidents which took place in Oak-Land last year were commonplace events rather than rarities.

There were fights--often vicious ones--in which students were really pounded. Blows to the head were the goals, not the accidents. There were several fires deliberately set in plastic hallway trash containers, inside lockers, in locker rooms, on buses, even in classrooms. Objects were thrown in crowded hallways, on buses, in classrooms and in the cafeteria. What kinds of objects? Everything. Notable among these objects were small triangular pieces of metal taken from the industrial arts laboratory, marshmallows from home economics, clay from art, books, and, of course, food. Hardly a day passed but what an orange, an apple, or a banana was not

thrown against a locker or a wall in a hallway. Malts--as well as pickles, grapes and milk cartons were carried from the cafeteria and dumped on the hallway floors.

There were at least four times during the year when alcoholic beverages were present: on a bus, on a ski club trip, a seventh grade class field trip and on school property before the start of classes one winter morning. I cannot recall the number of times that students were caught violating the smoking rules going to and from physical education classes and any one of a dozen places just outside the building.

There were the times when tips were received by a teacher, a counselor, a bus driver, a custodian, about someone in possession of some pot or paraphernalia. We followed up on every tip received and found either marijuana or a pipe about one-third of the time. In addition to marijuana, I can recall that three eighth grade girls were heavy users of acid for a period of about three months in the fall of the year. Two of the three were admitted into drug treatment before the year was ended.

The school board had initiated a policy regarding the use and/or possession of controlled substances and alcoholic beverages at school sponsored functions or on school property. In each circumstance, students were suspended from school for up to five days and referred to Washington County Human Services for a chemical evaluation. If they did not choose to go for the evaluation they were to remain suspended for up to five days; if an evaluation was made, they normally could return as soon as that was done (usually in a day or two).

Students were never suspended unless parents were notified. A certified letter was mailed within 72 hours, according to the Fair Pupil Dismissal Act--a Minnesota law. The only exception to this procedure was for suspension of less than one day, when the letter did not have to be mailed. Parents

were not always notified when an in-school suspension was meted out, since I recall no in-school suspension for greater than one day.

The Washington County Juvenile Court was tremendously helpful in working closely with schools, and the result was a quick disposition of any situation in which the school was not attaining success in some matters. For instance, since smoking is in violation of state law, the juvenile judge had requested each school to issue juvenile warning tags for smoking violations. After a second such tag, the judge called the student and parents into his court for an informal conference, hoping to avoid an actual court appearance for juvenile delinquency. If a third tag was issued the school was asked to file a juvenile delinquency petition and the student was subpoenaed into court. The typical result was six months probation. Two such cases took place at Oak-Land Junior High School last year.

There were also twelve incidents of truancy petitions which were filed after five days of confirmed truancy. In all but one case the student was placed on probation, and in most cases positive results were observed. There were, however, three cases in which truancy continued and the probation officer in charge recalled the juvenile to court and each of these three students were taken from the home and either placed in a foster home or sent to St. Croix Camp--a 24-hour detention setting.

I suppose that I'd like to come up with some type of pattern that would indicate what contributed to these problems but there just isn't a pattern. Broken homes are often the scapegoat for such problems but in the three cases where there were continued truancy problems, broken homes did not exist. Likewise, many of the drug cases were represented by two-parent families, both natural parents of the student.

In some cases, students involved were low achievers; in some they were good to above average

achievers. There was, likewise, no connection between problems and LD or EMR students. In short, there was just no single pattern that could assist in identifying a potential problem student, be that drugs, alcohol, truancy, smoking, fighting or theft.

It has been my observation that teachers often think I am exaggerating the negative events that take place in junior high schools. From the perspective of the teacher, the problems and successes within a school are quite differently perceived than from the vantage of the principal. The teacher normally sees those occurrences in a relatively small area of the school, whereas the principal is involved with the totality of the school. That's not always the way in which the principal would like it, I suspect, but that is the nature of the job.

I doubt, for instance, that there was even one teacher in Oak-Land Junior High School last year who was aware of the fact that I filed twelve truancy petitions and spent time in court every time a petition came up, nor that we had at least two situations in which students were apparently being physically abused, nor that we became intimately involved in one case where a seventh grader's father took after him with a butcher knife and threatened to cut his throat. I could go on and on. Many students had personal problems about which teachers were unaware--only counselors and administrators were completely in possession of such knowledge.

We had three eighth graders who left home and camped in a wooded area for over a week in six inches of snow. There was an eighth grade girl who had more personal problems than I could even imagine, but I am relatively certain that only the counselors and administrators knew that she had apparently been involved in a series of rapes over a period of the last three or four years. True, these incidents are somewhat sensational but hardly a week passed but that something major did not arise. Moreover, the principal or assistant principal was involved in every one of them, either directly or indirectly.

Though teachers were not aware of some of the worst problems, they spent a good deal of time helping kids to learn and to cope with growing up. For the most part, every teacher went out of the way to help kids--some minimally, of course, but others quite extensively. There were some teachers who helped kids solve problems which would ultimately have brought them into the office, or into the courtroom. There were two or three teachers who worked relentlessly to help their students with drug problems. Sometimes there was success; sometimes there was not.

I recall one particular incident when someone slopped paint all over the rear of the school building; our physical education staff went to work and within two days had nearly solved the case. The extra work that one of the physical education teachers did led to a student admitting involvement, which led to a resitutation program for the cleaning and repainting of the building and the student's willingness to recognize his need to enter treatment.

This teacher, by the way, identified about three boys each year who he thought were destined for problems and found ways to become a close friend with each. He is a person who is INVOLVED. I consider it a privilege to know him and I look forward to seeing him again someday because he is truly the kind of person who puts his students ahead of his own importance.

I want to say some things about specific parts of education that bother me, as clearly epitomized at Oak-Land Junior High School last year.

First, students at that age are at times very frustrating. I saw teachers who allowed frustration to totally control them and prevent any learning from taking place. I saw some teachers who had no sense of humor--could not laugh with students. Those teachers were the ones who, it seemed, were frequently making threats and sending students to the office. The office was pictured as some kind of bad place

and that is not as it should be.

In nearly every case (not all of course) the teacher could have either solved or prevented the problem from occurring in the first place with a little compassion for the problems that adolescents face while growing up. I believe that it becomes easy for us to forget that other people have problems and we too easily forget that, as teachers, we are in the business of helping others. No one ever said it was going to be easy, as posters advertising the periodical, Learning, depict so well.

All too often, teachers become caught up in their own little world and forget the larger picture in which they are involved. They become preoccupied with finding ways to sabotage the teachers' association, or the union (whichever side they are on), with finding ways to block the work of counselors, griping about an administrative decision or about how bad the working conditions are and so on and forget that they are teachers of kids, and that they are serving as models for kids to follow. Perhaps teachers' behavior is actually being imitated in the students' behavior!

Second, legislation is creating a monster, and there are specific groups of teachers which are contributing to the general disfavor of education. There is no question but that Public Law 94-142 came about because education was not adequately taking care of these needs itself. Unfortunately, the heavy hand of the law, enforced by the almighty dollar, is leading to divisiveness between various segments of the faculties of schools.

In Minnesota, LD teachers are supposed to have a student-teacher ratio of 15:1. Because of the attitude prevailing among LD teachers, it is clear that the 15:1 ratio is being interpreted as 15 student-hours maximum per day rather than average; absolute refusal to bend from that is creating a fight among the faculty.

The law is requiring that services be provided. Funds are being partially provided from the state, the remainder from the local district to staff the needed services. Teachers in "regular" classrooms are being asked to refer students for testing to "special programs"-nothing wrong with that! However, after a while, what becomes apparent is that, as referrals grow, more and more LD teachers are needed. The regular teachers see LD teachers meeting 15 students per day maximum, when regular teachers are meeting 30 students per hour average, or 150 students per day. It is easy to see, mathematically, that the ratios are ten times greater for the regular teachers and that, proportionally, at least ten LD teachers equal one regular teacher if the trend continues. There are limited funds available from local tax sources and every time an LD teacher is added, the regular teachers see the erosion of salary in the offing. But that isn't all. The LD teachers are requesting regular teachers to spend extra time with the LD students in their classes, as if the regular teacher had only three students per hour also--and they don't.

From the spring of 1978 to the spring of 1979, LD teachers went from 1.0 to 2.6 full-time equivalent in Oak-Land. Total school enrollment did not increase---rather it dropped slightly. The murmuring that was beginning to develop was that regular teachers were soon going to cease referring students that they suspected had learning disabilities. This same phenomenon was beginning to occur in some of the neighboring schools.

To add insult to injury the LD teachers appeared to have "several" meetings to attend during the year (never after school or on weekends). What they would do then, would be to send their students to the library, often without assignments. Why not hire a substitute, you ask. First, finding qualified LD substitutes is extremely difficult if not impossible and besides, the LD teachers did not want substitutes taking over their classes.

A growing dissatisfaction with LD programs has developed, therefore, among regular classroom teachers. An impending sabotage is in the offing and additionally, questions are beginning to surface regarding whether anything is happening to the students while in LD programs. Goals are being identified and agreed upon but students never seem to reach the position where they can exit from the program. In other words, once in LD, forever in LD! This raises additional questions as well as eyebrows about whether LD teachers are merely trying to guarantee themselves teaching positions in these times of declining enrollments and reduction-in-force situations in many schools.

A third concern that I have centers around the whole matter of chemical usage. It is there and it is significant. The use of alcohol has been present for many years and in and of itself, has not had tremendous impact on the instructional aspects of our schools. Its use and accompanying effect was (and is) primarily with the extracurricular part of our program.

However, the use of drugs and narcotics is a different story. I cannot speak for the effect on the mind or the body but the effect on the student's school work is extremely important. Even though only a small number of students are caught with drugs, there are large numbers who smoke marijuana regularly.

Even larger numbers smoke occasionally and staggering percentages have tried it. I'm not talking about movie stars and politicians snorting cocaine, nor am I talking about college and university students using hashish or sniffing angel dust. I'm not even speaking of high school juniors and seniors "smoking-up" on pot. I'm talking about junior high school students and YES, elementary students.

There is a mentality among us that says "it's the other guy, not me." There is an attitude that these problems exist someplace else, not here. If you are among them I say that you are wrong. It's here, in

junior high schools and in the elementary schools. It is in the small towns too, not just the urban areas.

And what are we doing about it? Anything? Or are we telling our students that drug usage exists in the large urban areas and among high school and college students only?

A fourth concern of mine is the lack of relationships between the various levels of education. We see it in the elementary and secondary schools as well as the college and university.

Much lip service has been given to the idea of sharing and working together for the good of education, the preparation of our teachers and so forth. What all that apparently means is: "Be reasonable, do it my way!" We are all much alike in that we are busy doing our own thing and take precious little time to go beyond that. We simply cannot be everything to everyone and we should not even attempt it.

My concern, however, is not that those people working in secondary education programs cannot become greatly involved in the work in special education or that someone working in measurement and statistics cannot spend too much time getting involved with the foundations. My greatest concern is the implication that areas other than those in which each of us is expending our efforts seems to be discredited as doing nothing, or at best, doing poorly what they are doing. I am offended when I hear people ridicule some department or area other than their own. It's obvious to me that they are operating from a position of ignorance or from jealousy--or both.

That brings me back to my third concern for schools, the matter of chemical usage. From within the Stillwater School District, several people volunteered to participate in an in-service effort to learn about and be able to identify users of chemicals. Further, they received training in

intervention. Now the kicker--to my knowledge, all of them were secondary teachers, counselors, and administrators. No elementary persons saw it as a need and apparently no one told them that they should be able to identify some of the characteristics of chemical involvement, too.

What makes an even greater impact on me though, is that the elementary principals I have talked with do not see this as their concern--it's a secondary problem! Yet when seventh graders report two or three years' involvement with drugs one must wonder whose concern it is.

I don't want to appear to be picking on elementary schools because I see them as doing a far superior job in in-service work relating to curriculum development than the secondary schools. Elementary staffs appear to be far more willing to try new, creative and innovative ways to work with their programs and their students. I see on the other hand, too many secondary staffs unwilling to alter their methods, curriculum, and overall program without considerable exertion of force.

The point that I'm attempting to make is that too much sniping is done instead of attempting to learn from one another and be helpful to one another. I know, for instance, that I have much to learn about education. I am aware that I can learn much from those people in elementary education, special education, foundations and other areas. All that I ask is that those people not cross me off as an incompetent when they don't know that. I believe that I am quite competent in my area, but not theirs! The opposite is true too, I'm sure.

Now that I have expressed four concerns about schooling stemming from my year away from the University, I suppose that many are anticipating my magic solution. I have no magic solution. It seems to me that we in education can best get our act together by improving our attitudes about the totality of education, while still pursuing the goal

of excellence in our particular areas of expertise. Not one of us has all the answers, nor for that matter do we know all of the questions. Not one of us can do all things for all people in spite of what our egos often lead us to believe. Let us recognize that we will not always make the right decisions and that it is okay to make mistakes. I certainly hope that when I make a mistake those around me will allow that to occur and help me rather than merely kick me when I'm down; and I hope that I can do likewise in return.

When I was about to graduate from high school several years ago, we were called upon to name a class motto. Several of us thought that a good motto would have been "Together we stick; apart we're stuck." In many ways, I suspect that education must function with that motto. If the profession doesn't "stick" together in its mission, we very well may be "stuck."

Some of you might find what I've shared interesting; others, unimportant; yet others, a total waste of time. The bringing together of the various segments of education is imperative in my view. I have taken a year to renew myself within the public school setting and have learned more from that experience than I'll likely be able to put to full use in my university position. More important, I feel, is the fact that I have attempted to bridge the gap between the "Ivory Tower" and the "Ivory Foxhole" with the hoped-for result of bringing these two worlds closer together.