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Paradigm Shifts



POINT OF VIEW BY **MARK W. CONLEY**

Life's Little Intangibles

It has been quite a year for all of us in education in Michigan. With summer approaching, maybe it's time to kick back a little bit. I'm walking down an access road to Camp Kiwanis, a Boy Scout camp between Mason and Dansville. Michigan spring is bursting out all around me. It's just between forsythia and lilac time. The grass is that shiny pastel green that you only see once a year. I can smell in the early evening air the transition between the winter and the spring. I'm wondering what I am going to say to you in my summer column.

"We (teachers) lost everything!"

"We (the government) have broken the back of the education monopoly!"

"The kids will be the losers with the proficiency exams!"

"I've got no sympathy for kids who don't pass the tests!"

Extremes. This is the era of extremes. I have never experienced a time when people in our business are so polarized over so many issues. As I think about the words that echo in my mind from the year, I watch my step as the road curves and steepens downward. I can hear the whoops of the boys from the woods to my right. The evening bonfire will be ready soon. I think about how the crisis in education is finding its way to my doorstep.

"The kids we worried about in the public schools have finally hit the colleges."

"You know, we had to lower our GPA requirements to keep our numbers up."

"Michigan Colleges of Teacher Education graduate twice as many teachers in any given year as Michigan schools require."

"Maybe colleges of education are going the way of the railroad — they're obsolete."

The great part of my job is that I get to hang out with so many dedicated educators. I count many as my personal friends. I sit with them countless hours, listening, trying to understand, confirming, comforting. Many share horrific stories about kids in need and pressures from inside the school and out. I realized long ago that for all of my good intentions, I couldn't really understand their pressures unless I literally walked in their shoes.

Recent changes in higher ed are making me walk in their shoes. Economic downturns spell increased pressure for colleges of education to increase enrollments. Ed schools have long been the "safety valve" for universities during economic hard times. Can't be a chemist? Be a teacher! Someone's always looking for them. Aren't they buying out a lot of teachers? What state's pushing early retirements now? Isn't Michigan retiring 80% of its teachers in ten years? Or is it 10% of its teachers in 8 years? My boss simply said: "Here's 144 student teachers. It's your job to place 'em!"

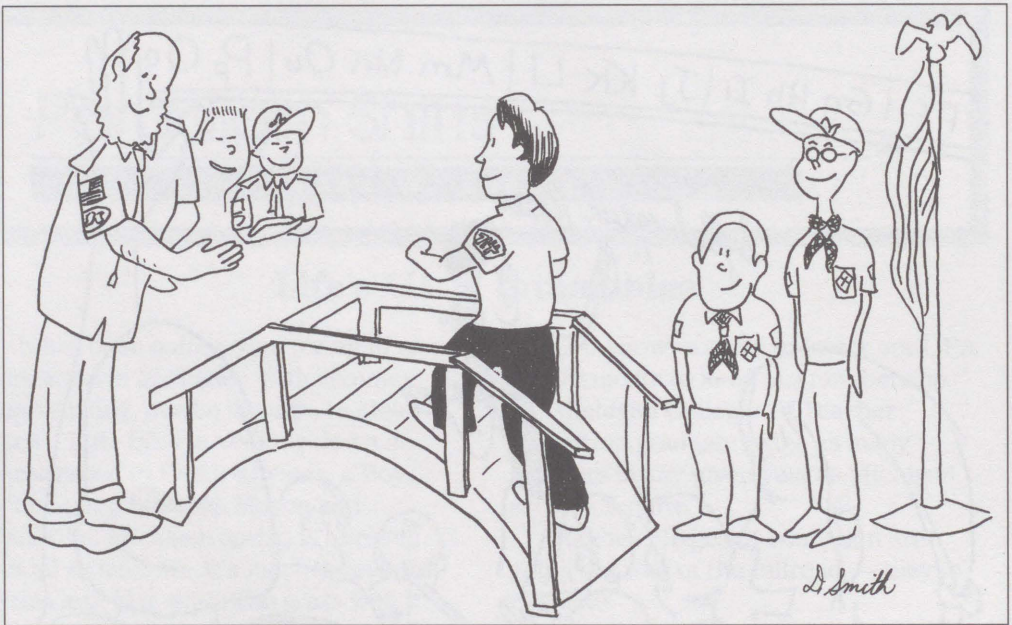
The sun is starting its descent into the



pines. I'm almost at the end of the camp road. The Mason-Dansville road is in sight. I'm unconsciously swishing my hand around my face and through my hair. The bugs are out. Through the pines, I can see a group of boys building the bonfire. They work with the aplomb of construction workers, throwing the big logs callously on top of the pile and then meticulously arranging them into a

cabin shape. They throw dried oak leaves and twigs into the center for maximum flammability. I reach the end of the road and sit down on a grassy knoll.

The old timers at the college told me about times like this — times when they taught methods courses to student hordes in the Kiva, times when it was not uncommon to find four or more student teachers in a public school class-



room. Though they express pride in meeting the challenge of those days, they also worry about the quality of what they were able to deliver and “You know, we really should have been more careful about who we let into the profession.” As one said to me recently, “The system will be stuck with our mistakes for many years to come.”

I hit the road right away when I sensed the enormity of the crisis. 500 student teachers were promised spots in the Lansing area. Some didn’t want to be in Lansing, preferring to be close to home in Saginaw, Grand Rapids, Oakland, Detroit. Most rearranged their lives to accommodate the college. Any fool could have predicted that there wouldn’t be 500 student teacher spots in the Lansing area. It was an administrative decision. The administrator retired. We — the professors and the student teacher kids — are left holding the bag. There’s nothing in the bag. The administrator needed retirement benefits.

Oh, don’t get me wrong. I don’t feel sorry for us. You shouldn’t either. How many times have I sympathized with public school colleagues who had been

done in by some cold administrative decision? Now, instead of just sympathizing, I can commiserate.

I watch the cars on their way to Dansville and Mason. Couples pass on their way to a night out. An old station wagon full of kids lumbers by. A Z-28 with a leadfoot driver zooms past, increasing speed as it heads up a small hill just beyond. Did you ever look down a road and imagine how it connects to all other roads? I look to my right. The Ingham County courthouse rises up out of the evening mists settling into the valley. Cars are starting to turn on their headlights. The lights begin as a pinpoint in the distance, turning into wide beams as they get closer to me. I hear the boys getting ready in the woods just behind me. They are growing more excited as the sun gets lower in the sky. A car slows and turns onto the camp road. I see a family inside, including a cub scout in full uniform. It is crossover night, the night when cubs cross over into Boy Scouts, a big family event.

I got the lucky job of telling the student teacher kids the bad news. Meet with 144 students in the Kiva. No excus-

es, just the facts. There are not enough placements close in to Lansing, they will have to drive a little bit. No, with Michigan's crisis in education, schools do not have student teachers at the top of their list of concerns. In spite of that, many teachers and administrators have been tremendously supportive.

"But I've signed a lease!"

"I want to make my own placement!"

"I don't have a car!"

"Exactly when will I know that I have been placed!"

In the middle of the fray, I could not help but think: "The 'me' generation meets Michigan schooling in the '90s." But I also keep in mind the steep price the student teacher kids are paying. The students seemed to know so little about what is happening in the schools. They are locked into the college culture: having paid their money, they want to be told what to learn and what — precisely — they will need to know to be successful. How could they yet know the drama that unfolds continuously on Michigan's educational stage?

"I won't lie to you," I promised. "I will treat you like professional educators and will tell you the facts. But you also need to know that the facts won't always be pleasant. That's what a career in education sometimes means."

A throng of student teacher kids stays after, sharing experiences and problems. I learn as many names as I can, jotting down notes on each one. I feel stressed and tired. Some thank me for working hard on their behalf. Some tell me how excited they are to finally be getting into a classroom.

At the scout camp, darkness is rapidly descending. I figure I had better walk back into the woods to the bonfire site — a large amphitheater — while I can still see the path. The bonfire is already roaring when I get to the site, sending sparks up into the dark blue evening sky.

The scouts and their families are assembled, the bonfire roaring at the center of the amphitheater. The cubs, who selected choice seats around the bonfire, are driven back by the intense heat. I sit next to my son. The festivities begin.

The boys perform silly skits. Many I remember from my days in scouts 25 years ago. Younger siblings howl when cups containing body parts are handed out to accompany a story (actually slices of liver, pieces of spaghetti and jello that feel eerily real in the cold, dark night). The kids take particular joy in tricking the adults. As the bonfire settles in to a steady burn, the crossover ceremony begins. The cubs line up on one side with their moms and dads, the boy scouts assemble on the right. One by one, the cubs get a new boy scout neckerchief. Each goes down the line of scouts shaking hands. The scouts greet their new members graciously, forgetting for the moment all of their talk about hazing the new recruits.

The circle is complete. The traditions are passed on. The values are universal. It is an evening of life's little intangibles, those events and feelings that seem small at the time, but make up the meaning of our lives.

I remember what a teacher friend has been saying to me almost constantly for the past several years: All that matters is the kids. And on this evening, in the midst of what seems like change all around me, I can think of no truer ideal.

Have a great summer and I'll talk with you again in the Fall.

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