

## **ETHICAL LITERACY® PERSPECTIVE**

**July 2007 - by Don Proffit**

***It is a strange freedom...to act with no accounting, to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets and no sign is given to mark the place one call's one's own town.***

**Howard Thurman**

In the spring of 2000, I was invited to take on the principalship of a New Jersey public high school where two years prior I had served as assistant principal. During an informal dinner conversation with board members, I was asked how I would go about improving the school's climate, including teacher morale and student behavior, which many at the table suggested was in a state of crisis. Moreover, they questioned if I would be able to work in partnership with all school stakeholders in the planning and construction of a new addition to the building.

It was an honor to be invited back to a school and district that I truly admired and had enjoyed during my previous tenure. However, at the time I was principal of a small, combined middle and high school; the thought of leaving this position raised a number of concerns. I was one year from receiving tenure. Furthermore, I felt comfortable working in the 400-pupil high school with students who earned high test scores and the 200-pupil middle school-not to mention the bright and warm staff of dedicated professionals. I considered the options carefully, consulted colleagues and did my best to think through this tough ethical dilemma: It was right on the one hand to stay in my small, comfortable school setting where everything is going so well for me and for my students. It was right on the other hand to take on this bigger challenge, with the promise of reaching more needy students. I ultimately decided to return to the place I felt was my home: the 1,500-pupil, comprehensive high school situated between Trenton, the state's capital, and Princeton, with the best and worst of both places seeping into Lawrence Township-a diverse collection of neighborhoods, both new and old, gathered around a series of suburban crossroads.

Working with faculty and staff, I have often heard comments about how the township's diversity comes together at Lawrence High School-from the wealth evidenced by the large homes and gated mansions of North Lawrence bordering Princeton, to the struggle of the working class inhabiting series of row houses on the city-planned blocks that seamlessly become the streets of Trenton. Interviewing

students, staff, and parents provided me with an insight into a school culture that was sick. They spoke of hallways-the streets and alleys of the school-that had reached capacity, and kidlock, the human equivalent to gridlock, was a common occurrence at intersections. Scuffles between students erupted on a regular basis. Students moved uneasily between classes, keeping heads cast down to avoid eye contact with others. In addition, the cafeteria, hidden deep within the building, rushed students through lunch lines to guarantee that all could be fed in 42 minutes or less. Tables littered with half-eaten plates of food, crushed milk cartons, straw wrappers, broken cookies, and spills were seldom wiped down before the next lunch rush. The halls were unsafe, the cafeteria was unhealthy, the staff was unhappy, and the students felt unheard.

With a deep sigh, I realized I had my work cut out for me. I knew that strong student-teacher relationships were the foundation for powerful learning and teaching. To nurture and sustain these relationships would require identifying a set of common values upon which we could all agree, regardless of what we believed, how much money we had, where we came from, or where we were going in life.

I decided to use ethics as my weapon against complacency, intolerance, and fear. I thought back to the work of Rush Kidder and the Institute for Global Ethics (IGE), which I had come across a few years earlier. My exposure to IGE's framework through an Ethical Fitness® Seminar (EFS) in the summer of 1998, coupled with further preparation as an EFS Trainer in 2000, led me to launch a multiyear initiative to change the school's culture and climate, improve student-teacher relationships, and increase student academic achievement.

As you follow this column in the issues ahead, I will share the process, programs, and projects that have changed and improved this New Jersey high school. In the next issue I will discuss how the Ethical Fitness® Seminar was offered to district administrators, new teachers, and-perhaps most importantly-a group of students who cared deeply about their school.