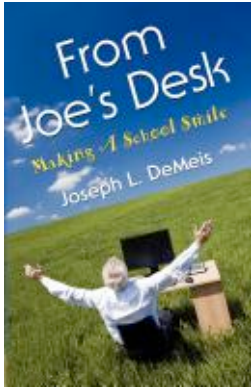


From Joe's Desk

Making A School Smile

Joseph L. DeMeis



FROM JOE'S DESK: Making A School Smile is a comical memoir written by a principal who recounts how he used humor in his weekly bulletins to build morale in a school during times of high stakes testing, relentless political changes and media criticism. Through these bulletins and the author's accounts of their educational relevance, the book tells the inside and heartwarming story of the school. For once, a positive book about schools and teachers.

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Introduction

Country Song Title of the Week: *Saddle Up The Stove Ma I'm Riding The Range Tonight.*

I have always liked making people laugh. Trying to be comical has not always worked for me but I persisted anyway. For instance in elementary school on more than one occasion I earned a lower grade by making an assignment humorous rather than sticking to the topic. In grade six at Masson Elementary School, for example, I remember weaving a tale about how I broke my arm while being chased by a proboscis monkey. I told this story when I was supposed to be debating the positive and negatives aspects associated with saving endangered species. Mr. Peroni, our teacher, wrote in bold print at the top of my paper, "Mr. DeMeis," (he liked to formally address us by our last names when he was not shaking my friends Stanley or Pedro by the neck for yet another unfinished homework assignment) "you might have earned a 'B' had you added more fact and less funny business to your oral presentation." I had sacrificed myself again just to get a few laughs. I always seemed to feel that the response from my classmates was more important than the grade. Some people are addicted to love but for me I am addicted to humor.

Trying to blend comedy with responsibility, as an elementary principal, is another matter. No one would argue that a principal needs to be responsible first and maybe add the role of comedian way down the list of competencies. When educating

From Joe's Desk

students began looking like test first and educate later I knew my days were numbered. Regardless of tests I had decided to retire anyhow but when my wife began looking for a change and was hired at a small private college near Boston I decided it was time for me to go too. Right now I am retired and have much time on my hands, time to watch squirrels chase each other around trees, chipmunks that tantalize our malamute and time to write a book that shares the craziness of the school I led, W.S. Elementary School (WSS).

My first experience with comedy on the job began as I started to serve as a substitute principal at WSS, the same school where I would eventually become principal. Substituting was fun, I found, because I could act like a big shot without the responsibilities. The staff saw me, during these little forays into the world of administration, as a sort of quasi-authority. Since the real “boss” was away they could ease up a little which helped me set the stage for a few added shenanigans. Besides, having a substitute around helped the staff release their pent-up silliness making them more receptive to my nonsense.

For example, one time, in the spirit of fun I recall doing the morning announcements, something that was done each day promptly at 8:35 a.m., and handing one of the teachers some false information to read over the public address system. On this particular occasion the teacher, Pearl, was given a sheet to read about a false national week. You have heard about those national “so and so” weeks; the ones that few people recognize and even fewer really care about. I gave Pearl a note at the very last second and she read that it was National Striped Bass Week and everyone should drop a line to their congressional representative about the need to save the striped bass. She read the whole thing before realizing that it was bogus. “Drop a

Making A School Smile

line,” how stupid is that? We all had a big laugh over it and still chuckle about this silliness to this day.

After substituting for a couple of years I was minding my own business one October day in 1998 when the superintendent came in to my office. He sat down and said that I was going to become the interim principal at WSS in January because the current principal was planning to take another job. Of course I was surprised. I hid my true emotions regarding his offer, stoically providing the appropriate number of ahems and ahas. Internally I was dancing with joy. I was elated because for many years I dreamed about being the principal of this school, however, since I had never been a teacher the possibility seemed unrealistic. As the superintendent kept talking and gave me the specifics I could not help but think to myself, “Will they really trust me with the keys to that building?” I was scared but felt that by this point in my career I should be responsible and mature enough to lead a school. Obviously the superintendent thought so too. Besides, who ever heard of a principal who was not trusted with the keys to the school?

Before becoming a principal I was a school psychologist for 25 years. Secretly I was feeling less effective as a psychologist anyhow. Most of the years were played out in the same district where I was to eventually become an elementary principal. School psychology was not a comical job. It was not one which provided me with many humorous outlets. However, I found, strangely enough, that administration had many opportunities to make jokes. It had to include humor, I quickly discovered, or else the only option for survival would be alcoholism or drug addiction.

From Joe's Desk

When the superintendent, a rather confident and assertive man, told me of my new assignment I chuckled inside and saw this as a new opportunity to try something different with my career. I finally had the chance to become a real principal and not just the guy who substitutes and makes jokes over the public address system. If Mr. Peroni was still around I wondered if he would predict my behavior as a principal, that is, that I would make jokes on the job and risk my grade. If so then what grade would I eventually earn for my performance?

As I think back perhaps it was risky to make humor a major tenet of my principalship but I did it anyway. The fact is that schools are never on the top ten lists for places to look for laughs. Imagine a U.S. News and World Reports headline:

An Exclusive Report:
The Top 10 Funniest Elementary Schools: And What and Who Made Them That Way

An elementary school would not be the first place most people would stop if they wanted a laugh. However, humor was emphasized at our elementary school and I have decided to write about it. Given all the serious talk about schools in the media a little bit of joking may give the ordinary reader a different opinion about schools and hopefully get a few educators to laugh too. Certainly my story could not turn political criticism any more negative toward schools. I am here to emphatically state that schools can be funny places too.

I was a principal from January 1999 through June 2008 and I wish I could say that I sat down one day and sketched out a conscious plan about how to interject humor into the school day. If I had created a plan it would have had research, charts and

Making A School Smile

graphs but it for sure would not include one of those pesky PowerPoint demonstrations that had become all the rage. (Just so you know, one of the 10 reasons I retired had to do with PowerPoint Overload—I was in a sense P.O’ed.) Anyhow, that was not the case; no major plan was ever really formed. Instead, I used the fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants method and added humor to ideas borrowed from the previous principal.

One of those ideas was the weekly bulletins and I stumbled on to the power of making them humorous just as I stumbled into becoming a principal. Whenever it was appropriate, and sometimes when it was not, humor was injected into the bulletins and then generalized into the life of the school.

In the case of the bulletins, they were expected to be complete by each Thursday, Friday morning at the latest. Bulletins were written to inform staff of all the happenings scheduled for the week ahead. Making the bulletins comical on occasion, I soon found, raised my status from just an ordinary guy wearing a tie and occupying the principal’s chair to a small time hero (“hero,” by the way, is a word assigned to way too many ordinary people these days). Adding humorous country music titles to most bulletins along with the silliness I soon found got even more people to read them. Later yet, springing an occasional nutty video filled with self-deprecation eventually became a recipe for a happy staff exuding high morale.

What I mean is the humor and games helped increase our school’s motivation and morale. I think more administrators ought to consider the benefits of instilling a high morale, through humor or otherwise, not only because it is the right way to treat people but also for how it rubs off to benefit students.

From Joe's Desk

Schools are filled with people who care deeply about educating children while simultaneously live real lives. Educating students is a juggling act sometimes that occurs in spite of a host of life stressors, professional and personal, and obeys no timeline and respects no barrier. There were a healthy number of life events that happened during my principalship that easily illustrates this point. It seemed reasonable to emphasize morale because a happy staff will subsequently educate students better.

Mostly this is a story about that school, WSS where morale and caring were high and hopefully a couple of laughs along the way kept it that way. It is a behind the scenes tale about our school and how it ran on a daily basis. Humor was a prominent part of the story and it is emphasized throughout. The same story could have been told through the high stakes testing movement that was just getting implemented in 1999 but there is very little about tests that make people laugh. Believe me, I gave hundreds of achievement and IQ tests as a school psychologist before becoming the principal of WSS. Tests, used correctly provide useful information but where is the fun in telling a story through the lens of the testing movement? Besides the obvious, humor was what made me excited about going to work each day after brushing my teeth, taking some deep breaths and reminding myself as I gazed into the mirror that, "They trusted you to be the principal so remember you are an administrator first and maybe a comedian second."

The reasons for spending two years writing about the events from 1999 to 2008 had to do with all the fun and laughter we had while providing kids with a superior education. Somehow letting all this go without acknowledging all the special times we all had seemed wasteful. I thought it would be fun to present WSS as it functioned for those nine years using the actual

Making A School Smile

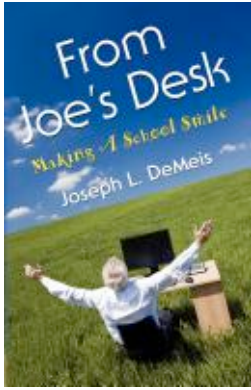
weekly bulletins as a guide. My original reporting of the weekly bulletin, January 1999 to June 2008, is presented below. The bulletins are abbreviated leaving out most of the mundane business. I purposefully left small portions of the ordinary business just to give readers a flavor for the daily events that occur in a school. Some weeks were skipped because they were not very interesting. The bulletins included are considered the funniest and best represent life in the school. In addition, at the end of many bulletins I have added information designed to provide a context for the jokes or the reason an educational issue or personal story was included.

The bulletins are presented in their original form so grammar, spelling, and punctuation are not always correct. Please understand that they were often written quickly whenever I could find the time during a busy week. I did take license here and there to make small changes so that the bulletins would be easier for the layperson to comprehend. I also changed the names of people mentioned in the bulletins to retain their anonymity as I did in this introduction.

Mostly I hoped to chronicle the fun I had for nine years being an educator, a principal in a wonderful school filled with great people. Humor helped us do our jobs better which was my theory then and remains my belief today. Our school, WSS was successful and a great place for children to learn partially due to the humor but mostly because of the excellent staff assembled. I will confess that if it is possible for a person to love a place then I was guilty of being in love with WSS. From the very first days of my career in Upstate New York culminating with me retiring as the principal, I was in love. Humor was a major part, I believe, of that love affair. While there are many ways to make a school successful, humor helped ours and it helped me to lead.

From Joe's Desk

I hope you step back and enjoy those years as much as we did and chuckle a little. We laughed at ourselves and it helped us be better educators. I hope you enjoy the schtick.



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