

Anonymous Letter¹

Jack Garner is principal of Dewey Elementary School. Dewey is one of five elementary schools in Pleasantville, a community of 30,000 in a middle Atlantic state.

Pleasantville is an interesting cross section of America. It is a working-class community in transition to a different kind of workforce. The old work of farms, mills, and mines has given way to newer occupations in a small aircraft plant and in the emergence of the state college (recently renamed the State University at Pleasantville). The paper mill, a carpet factory, a chemical plant, a small steel mill, and a coal mine were formerly the major employers of the townspeople. But recently, much to the dismay of the working people in Pleasantville, most of the factories and mills were in decline. Unemployment was up to 13 percent and not getting better. The people blamed the government. In the old days, there had been no EPA and no environmentalists and no interference from the state and federal bureaucrats. In those days, people worked hard and made a decent living.

With the advent of environmental-protection regulations and changes in the marketplace, the steel mill employed only half of what it had employed fifteen years ago. So too with the paper mill and the coal mine. The chemical plant was on the verge of bankruptcy as newer dyes were imported from abroad and expensive chemical cleanup projects plagued the plant for the past three years. In fact, there seemed to be only one major industry that was thriving in Pleasantville—the state university. It was growing, from an enrollment of 2,000 ten years ago to nearly 10,000 students today. Although construction of the expanding campus had produced many jobs during the past five years, it did not offset the decline of the old industries. Moreover, many of the jobs that were produced by the state university were professional positions that required employment of outsiders rather than townspeople.

Some people resented the intrusion from the outside and harkened back to the halcyon days of the past. Others in the community, especially businesspeople, welcomed the expansion of the school and were proud of the fact that Pleasantville was becoming sophisticated.

Jack Garner was no stranger to Pleasantville. At thirty-five, his entire life had been spent in and around Pleasantville. He had gone to elementary school, junior high, and high school in town. Upon graduation, he went to the local state college and majored in education. His first job was as science teacher at Pleasantville High. During his first year of teaching, Jack Garner decided that he wanted an expanded role in education down the road. He began taking curriculum classes in the summers at the main campus of the state university, sixty-five miles from Pleasantville.

Taking courses at the main campus was Garner's first real exposure to life outside of Pleasantville. A chronic bad knee had kept him out of the service, and perhaps just as well. Thinking back, Garner judged the experience at the main campus to be an eye-opener for a country boy, as he sometimes referred to himself. Ten years later, he had completed his doctorate in educational curriculum, served as district-wide elementary science curriculum coordinator, and as a result of his success in working with people and his genuine good sense, he was promoted to principal of the new Dewey Elementary School. Some might think that Dewey was a progressive school, but the Dewey this elementary school was named after was Thomas, the former governor of New York, not the educator. Therein lay a substantial difference. Dewey Elementary School was not a place hospitable to change. Students had grown up in the system and sent their children to Dewey. They wanted the same good education they had received—no frills, no life adjustment, no multiculturalism, no debates on right to life or the nature of families, just basic learning in reading, math, science, writing, and history.

There was no question that the surrounding neighborhood of Dewey was conservative, but it was slowly changing as more and more college professors bought houses in Dewey Heights. In fact, the Dewey neighborhood was becoming a choice residential area for young professionals in the community.

As a curriculum person and skillful administrator, Garner had been able to initiate a strong elementary school curriculum. He had combined many of the elements of cooperative learning and mastery education to engage students individually and collectively in the pursuit of math, science, and reading. His whole-language approach to the teaching of English and composition was a model that was frequently observed by students from the local college. (Garner had a hard

time thinking of his undergraduate school as a state university; he still thought of it as his college.) Five years as curriculum coordinator and five years as principal had produced a school of which he was proud. The elementary school students continued to do well and parents were generally supportive of his initiatives, even though some complained that he was getting away from the basics.

It was Monday morning. As Jack reviewed his mail, he was shocked at the third letter that he opened and read.

May 11

Dear Dr. Garner:

You should know that your science curriculum supervisor is a homo. He lives with another man and I have seen them fondling each other in the tavern in Greenville. I don't care what people do in their private lives, but teachers are different. I don't want my son endangered by this guy. Of course, there is always the question of AIDS, and I don't want him abusing my child. There is a rumor that Jenkins has not been well. Frankly, we're worried for the safety of our children.

We know that you are with us on this issue. After all, you are one of us. Why don't you do something about this? Everyone is talking about it. And if you don't do something, I can't be responsible for what some hotheads might do. Jenkins is in some danger.

I am not going to sign this letter because I don't want to be involved in this, but I think you ought to know about the situation. Someone is going to get hurt. Do something before it becomes a police matter.

Sincerely,

A Concerned Parent

Matt Jenkins had been Garner's new elementary science supervisor for the past three years. Although Garner had not hired Jenkins directly, the former superintendent, who had thought highly of Jenkins, consulted him. Garner had called one of his former professors in curriculum at the state university and the professor had said, "He is a little peculiar but without question he is one of the brightest and most creative students I have known. He will be an asset to your program." Without much further ado, Jenkins was hired, even though he was an outsider and a segment of the community was opposed to hiring from outside.

There was no question in Garner's mind that Jenkins had shown strong leadership in improving the science curriculum at Dewey. Other teachers liked him because he was low-key, supportive, sensitive, and nurturing. He had a few odd mannerisms, but they didn't seem to bother anyone. He stayed to himself and lived ten miles outside of the city, in a small suburb of Pleasantville called Greenville. No one seemed to know much about Jenkins or his personal life. Rumor had it that Jenkins spent a lot of his time at University Station, the main campus of the state university. Many of the townspeople took a dim view of the liberal goings-on in University Station, but it was a world away. Only one time could Garner remember any negative comments about Jenkins. One of the parents had complained that he was always touching her son. Garner had discreetly looked into this matter and found nothing substantial. Rather, he found that Jenkins had grabbed the student in question a number of times to correct his aggressive behavior with the other children. The student in question was a little on the wild side.

Garner was a bit surprised to discover that Jenkins lived with a new high school English teacher, Brad Korbus. Garner had been instrumental in the recruitment and selection of Korbus, and now they were roommates in Greenville. Garner was inclined to feel that whatever people did privately was their own business. His policy for dealing with anonymous letters was to file them in the circular file. Yet the implied threat of this letter troubled him.

He felt constrained to do something, but what? He thought about turning the matter over to the local police. Should he talk to his superintendent? Was this a crank letter from an isolated individual? Did he have a right to make inquiries—even if done discreetly? Should he talk to Jenkins? What would he say, if he did? Supposing Jenkins was gay and living with another man, would it matter? Is there a problem? A potential problem? Is this a time for preventive action? Or will any action simply exacerbate the situation? Is it time for the district to develop a policy on private behavior or alternate lifestyles?

Assume the role of principal.

- What are the short-term and long-term problems in this case?
- Is this a case for satisficing, muddling through, or adaptive scanning?
- What are your immediate and long-term plans?
- Who should be involved in this decision and how?
- No matter what your eventual strategy, make sure it includes a plan to address the dysfunctional consequences of your actions.

1. This case was written by Wayne K. Hoy and C. J. Tarter from Hoy, W, K. & Miskel, C. (1996). *Educational Administration: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New York: McGraw Hill.