

Crisis at Marshall Creek¹

Marshall Creek has long enjoyed a peaceful existence as a small, rural town. This closed, close-knit community has traditional values, has been deeply committed to the education of its children, and has been suspicious of outsiders. Nonetheless, no town is an island, and Marshall Creek is no exception. New people, new ideas, different values are creeping into the halcyon of Marshall Creek. Cultural diversity has brought tension and conflict to a school system whose previous concerns about student deportment centered around tardiness and talking back to teachers, and an occasional smoke in the boys' lavatory. But now their problems are drugs, single parents, and even an AIDS case once in a while.

Such public meetings as the town council, the school board, the recreational authority, and, of all places, the hitherto sleepy meetings of the library board have been transformed from calm and deliberate meetings to arenas of rancorous and volatile conflict. Gone is the peace of the past. Diversity has brought opposing points of view, something that the old timers of Marshall Creek find uncomfortable to say the least.

The argument at the library council is probably a case in point. The library had subscribed to a limited number of periodicals and popular magazines over the years, slowly cutting back as the costs of subscriptions grew. Newer residents in town expected to find magazines that catered to minority audiences and sometimes unpopular views. The older residents on the library board didn't object to those views; they did object to the town library paying for them.

As the community has changed, new problems have emerged. The PTO, which has always supported the conservative norms of the community, has developed a militant faction of outsiders. These outsiders are families from urban communities who have migrated to Marshall Creek over the past five years. They have become vocal, assertive, and, some would say, antagonistic as they push for programs that are looked upon by the insiders as trendy, liberal, and decadent--who, after all, needs a program on modern living or whatever passes for sex education these days? These are personal problems that should remain in the family inner circle.

The board of education, however, has remained staunchly conservative. Seven of the nine members on the board are considered pillars of the community. But two recently elected board members hold to more contemporary views and present an enigma to the other board members. Without question, both have growing constituencies in the community. And, one has become a gadfly on the board, calling into question the motives of many of the board's actions. He often describes the stogy board as living in the past. The board does not care for this description. The other new member serves as the speaker for almost any group with an axe to grind at the board meeting.

The school has not gone unscathed in these conflicts. There has always been a powerful local clique that has been a leader in the activities of the informal organization of the school. However, a new and more progressive subgroup, composed mostly of younger teachers from outside the community, has challenged the status quo and made life in the school more interesting, if not more difficult.

Dr. Charles Frank, the superintendent of schools in Marshall Creek, is himself a product of the local schools. He grew up in the community, graduated from a local teachers' college, started as a teacher in the system twenty-five years ago and gradually worked his way up from teacher to high school principal to the superintendency, a post he has held for the past six years. Although Dr. Frank understands both the politics and feelings of the community, he is also aware of aspirations and concerns of newcomers to Marshall Creek. He realizes that life in Marshall Creek is in the process of changing; nonetheless, he is gravely concerned about the infighting and polarization that is occurring in both the community and the school. He considers himself an open and progressive educator who can deal with the realities of change. He has spent his life in Marshall Creek, but, except for a few outsiders, no one would call him provincial.

The most recent high school PTO meeting focused on sex education. The outsiders have been promoting a more systematic and comprehensive program that begins in first grade, develops gradually through successive grades, and includes such topics as contraception, safe sex, and abortion. The proposal for distribution of condoms for sexually active students has polarized

both the community and the teachers in the school, while making civil meetings almost impossible. Most people are violently opposed to a sex education program that goes beyond basic health and reproductive issues, which is taught in the high school. The growing and aggressive campaign of the newcomers, however, has spilled over into the student body. Even the students are choosing sides in this debate and among high school students the notion of a condom clinic is popular.

Mr. Ross, the high school principal, telephoned Dr. Frank the morning after the latest PTO meeting to brief him on the discussion that had taken place. Dr. Frank understood the significance of the issues raised by the PTO in light of the increasing sexual activity of teenagers and the AIDS crisis. He realized that the matter of the sex education program, although controversial, needed to be confronted. But he thought he needed more time to prepare a sound analysis. He wanted to be able to respond in a rational rather than an emotional way. He decided to mobilize a study team comprised of parents, teachers, students, social workers, and medical authorities to prepare a report on which he could base his actions. Events overtook Dr. Frank, however, before he could act on his ideas. A seemingly inconsequential lunchroom fracas turned into a nightmare.

A fight between two boys in the high school cafeteria moved beyond the school when it was discovered that one of the boys had tested HIV positive. This hitherto confidential information came out as a result of rampant rumors among the students that one of the boys had AIDS. The news spread to surrounding towns and the television and print press soon descended on the school and the superintendent, demanding to know who had AIDS, what steps the school was taking to protect the rights of the infected students, and how the uninfected student body was being protected. The rush of publicity and public concern placed all the superintendent's deliberation in sharp relief. The press, parents, church and civic groups, administrators from neighboring schools--all were watching Frank to see what he would do. All of these activities had occurred with the last twenty-four hours.

Dr. Frank quickly lost the initiative in the matter as a parents' group demanded immediate removal from the school of any student who tested positive for HIV and, moreover, the group was demanding that all teachers and all students be tested immediately. Until their demands were met, a group of parents, led by Mrs. Delgado, one of the board members, threatened to boycott the school.

The response to this threat was quick in coming. The state said that they would enforce the attendance laws and, thus, they would take notice of any failure to enforce the attendance codes. Dr. Frank sat back in his chair and reflected. It was only Wednesday afternoon at 3:00. His attempt to bring some sort of order to the problem could be seen in the formidable, perhaps intimidating, schedule of appointments he must make. He needed to burn the midnight oil in preparation for his schedule tomorrow. He needed help to get ready. Who should he involve? He had instructed his secretary not to interrupt him with any more phone calls. He had to develop his schedule of appointments for the next several days and he was feeling besieged. He looked at the phone requests for meetings thus far today:

- Mrs. Delgado and three PTO parents
- Mr. Gerstein, lawyer for the ACLU
- Mr. & Mrs. Young, parents of the AIDS infected youngster
- Jim Jones, the prominent TV anchorperson for CBS
- Jack Mazza, president of the Marshall Creek Teachers Association.
- Robert Smathers, State Department of Education
- Fr. Louis Healy, Pastor of Immaculate Conception parish
- Shirley Haggarty, Long Valley AIDS Awareness Federation
- Academic cabinet meeting (the 6 senior administrators in the district)
- President of the Marshall Creek High School student council

Mr. & Mrs. Croy, parents of the youngster involved in the fight with Billy Young, accompanied by their lawyer

1. Written by Professors Hoy and Tarter from Hoy, W. K. & Tarter, C. J. (1995).. **Administrators Solving the Problems of Practice.** Boston: Allyn & Bacon.