

That's Not My Job, Or Is It?

Dick Huddleston

I still don't like picking up garbage from the school floors. Usually, when I see an old discarded kleenex or a cigarette pack in the hallway, I leave them. In fact, everyone walks around this litter as if it were not there. We all seem embarrassed to pick such "stuff" up. I'm not sure why.

I don't feel at all embarrassed picking up garbage at home. I like to see the house clean and generally it's reasonably easy to keep it so. But not at school.

In many ways I pretend the school and other public facilities do not belong to me. I find it hard to look after them like my own things. On my travels, I've suspected others are having trouble looking after "public" school property. The entrances to some schools have looked like the scoop on a front-end loader: scratched, banged, dented, and as though a load of rocks entered the school rather than good-natured, sensitive children (Ha!). The beaten-down lawns look like the aftermath of a major golf tournament. No wonder we don't bother with cement sidewalks which are as obsolescent as a seventh-grade speller. I feel sorry for any of the surviving trees. Inside the school, I've seen scratched walls, gouged ceiling tiles, and enough rubber marks on the floors to keep janitors on their knees most of the night.

Rudolph Dreikurs (1957) maintained that mutual respect between persons must be a requirement of a workable democracy. I think a similar requirement applies between people and buildings. We've got to care for our facilities.

Perhaps as a teacher and as a student, I have been pampered. Mother might not be at school to look after me, but I do expect coffee to be made, the sidewalks to be shoveled, a staff lounge to be cleaned, a toilet to be unplugged, and equipment to be repaired. But all the time?

A friend recently gathered a group of students together and planted spruce trees around their school. No great expense was involved. An enjoyable trip to the country, a couple of noon hours planting, and the job was done. And all worked together. Somehow these people hit on doing something for their school and with a great deal of satisfaction.

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Could we be involved with similar projects around the school? Could we not shovel the sidewalks once in awhile (like every day)? I can imagine if I got outside with my students, some would be surprised I knew which end of the shovel to use. Others would be pleased to participate in this strange venture. Most important, others would be afraid to be seen engaged in what they think to be lowly tasks. It would take a lot of courage to be seen shoveling and to receive the brunt of degrading catcalls from a few sidewalk superintendents. I could not expect my students to face such challenges unless I was willing too. But how else, other than through active care of facilities, can I expect us to realize the school belongs to us?

If respect for school facilities is to be regained, we must have the guts to redevelop and enforce rules of conduct within the facility. To do so will require up-to-date public information on the costs of solvents, paints, brooms to maintain and repair the facility. Approximate costs of heating the halls open to -30 C air should be estimated. Thus, those students and teachers who choose to air condition the school in winter or choose to leave some indelible mark on the school can pay for such "privileges." The bootmarkers can scrub their marks, the windowbreakers can replace windows on their own time, and so on. The school then becomes our property, because we who use the school will be responsible for its upkeep.

At the same time, general facility responsibilities could be assigned to everyone in the school. Schedules for clean-up, shoveling, gardening, lawn-mowing, dusting, to name only a few, will have to be fixed and followed year-round. (The idea of the Rotary Club's clean-up week in Alberta schools is fine, but a joke if implemented only one afternoon a year.)

These ideas might be fine and dandy, but where are we going to start?

The usual remedy calls for a good dose of training starting in kindergarten. But why should we wait 8 or 10 years until a newly trained generation starts cleaning up? The solution lies only with you and me. If we want to start looking after our schools, we've got to do it! We cannot wait for a principal to assign such work. We will have to start in our own classrooms, in our own halls, and schoolyards. And, if we have the courage to look after our school, our students will soon realize that school (and maybe even schooling) is valuable.

And isn't that one of our jobs?

Reference

Dreikurs, R. *Psychology in the Classroom*. New York: Harper & Row, 1957.