

# AN OPEN LETTER

August 2003

Principal, Staff, and Board Members  
Boontown Seventh-day Adventist School

Dear Friends,

Today, our family visited your school. We have decided our two sons, Kyle and Brandon,\* will not be attending. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Our neighbor brags about your caring teachers, Bible-centered curriculum, and high values. While our local public school does offer caring teachers, a humanistic curriculum and a dearth of values are also evident. We are definitely in the market for a Christian school.

As we parked our car, I couldn't help but notice last fall's leaves blanketing the base of the overgrown bushes in front of your school. Bare dirt next to the front door greeted us except for a deteriorating McDonald's french fry box on one side and a smashed soda can on the other. Smudged fingerprints clouded the glass doors.

Our negative first impressions were temporarily forgotten with the graciousness of your assistant in the front office. In the business world, her genuineness, warmth, enthusiasm, and wealth of information would be in great demand! But she mentioned that she worked only part time.

As we toured your facility, our eyes were drawn to dirty walls, torn, faded posters, drooping live plants, and dust-laden silk ones. Torn and dirty carpet or dull, scarred tile was underfoot.

In one classroom, we saw bright, artful bulletin boards, desks reasonably clean and in neat rows, and several attractive study areas, making us wish one of our children could be a fortunate student in that room.

Unfortunately, a brief visit to what would be Kyle's room disappointed us. A variety of "stuff" lay atop the low bookcases that lined the windows. The teacher's desk was piled high, and books and papers were strewn about the tables and floor. The old couch in the reading nook was stained and torn. The room bulged with everything from a sailboat to a tree house to a fire station. All good ideas, but they made the room seem cluttered and messy.

Perhaps most disturbing—our tour of the bathroom. The stench announced its nearness before I even rounded the corner. I opened the door and found: no paper towels, water dripping from the faucet, unsightly wax buildup, and an overflowing, cracked plastic wastebasket.

The principal wasn't there when we visited, so I called back to discuss our concerns about Kyle's learning disability. I phoned at three different times of day, but never got an answer, and the answering machine did not pick up. What if I had had an emergency and needed to contact my child's teacher? I finally reached the principal late one afternoon, but she brushed off my concerns, saying she was sure that in her school's smaller classrooms, children received more individualized attention than they would in the public system.

Why do I write this letter? Because from what I understand, your teachers and curriculum for the most part are exceptional. However, if a school does not take care of its physical plant, I wonder if they will take care of the needs of my children. In business, we have been taught that people have choices, so the packaging had better "look good," or you may not even get the consumer through your door—curb appeal, I believe it is called.

So I write this letter not to make you feel bad, but to alert you that you may be losing other good students. Don't underestimate the power of "sprucing up" a bit and enhancing your customer service.

We've chosen to send our children to a smaller school in a nearby town. This school also has caring teachers and a curriculum with Christian values. Their physical plant is considerably smaller, so I am guessing the constituents have much less money than those of your larger institution. But let me tell you, that Seventh-day Adventist school is sharp. You would do well to visit!

Sincerely,

The Clark Family\*



\*A pseudonym. The author is a church employee in North America. This article is based on more than 30 years of observations made by quietly walking through front doors of schools public and private, outside and inside the U.S., East Coast to West Coast, North to South, kindergarten through university, historic buildings and modern complexes.

## HOW DOES YOUR SCHOOL RATE?

### Outside

- Bushes and trees trimmed
- Pavement clean and in good repair
- Healthy grass—no bare patches. (Of course, in drought conditions, brown grass may be the norm)
- Flower beds—don't underestimate the beauty of a well-mulched, weed-free flowerbed (even if the area is small)
- Sidewalks in good condition
- Signs—attractive (fresh paint, if needed) and informative

### Entrance

- Visually appealing. What first draws your eye when you walk in the front door?
- Healthy live plants or good-looking silk ones
- Is there clutter (old magazines, brochures, notices, lost and found)? If there is a table or bookcases in the entry, are they neat and attractive?
- What is on your walls? Nothing? Pictures or posters? Are they in good shape?
- If your entryway has glass windows or doors, do they sparkle?
- Are there clues that this is a Christian school?

### Throughout the Building

- Walls clean and recently painted (most schools will need yearly painting)
- Floors waxed or tiles and grouting clean and unstained
- No clutter in the halls
- Carpet clean, not raveled or torn
- No spider webs in corners
- Areas well lit, burned-out bulbs replaced
- Water fountains working and clean

### Bathrooms

- Clean-smelling. Solve odor problems; don't just cover them up.
- Waste baskets in good repair and emptied regularly
- Regularly checked to ensure sufficient tissue and towels, and to keep floors free of clutter and trash
- No dirt or wax buildup
- Mirrors clean and unbroken
- Faucets and toilets working well
- If there are lockers in the bathroom, be sure the area around them is tidy.



### Classrooms

- Attractive bulletin boards
- Desks and bookcases orderly and in good repair
- Paper and books stored in desks and carrels, not on the floor or piled on tables and desks
- Clean cages or aquariums for class pets
- Limited number of study areas—too many make the classroom look chaotic and make it difficult to walk around the room
- Good air circulation and comfortable temperature
- Supplies organized and readily available
- Pleasant colors; clean paint
- Can you tell that this is a Christian classroom?

### Playground and Driveway

- Equipment regularly maintained, safe and freshly painted (if applicable)
- Free of clutter and trash
- Signs painted and repaired
- Flowerbeds weeded and mulched
- Bushes and trees trimmed and healthy
- Grass mowed and trimmed
- Fence in good repair and freshly painted
- Free from any "hidden" danger (e.g., objects in the

grass that children could trip over, unfilled holes inviting a broken ankle, etc.)

- If there is a storage shed, is it in good repair and freshly painted? Is it locked? Are tools lying about? If you don't have a storage shed, perhaps you should buy one.

### Customer Service

- Are you responsive to the concerns of parents and students?

- Is your office assistant well informed, polite, and helpful? If you don't have an office person, do you have an answering machine that is checked regularly? Does someone respond promptly to phone and E-mail messages?

- Does the school have a Web site that features the institution's mission and curriculum, seasonal programs and outreach activities, and a list of teachers and administrators? (Be sure to include attractive photos of the school, its activities, students, and staff.) The site should include a map showing how to get to the school, as well as contact information, such as phone number and E-mail address(es). Update the information regularly.

### A Final Note . . .

At first glance, this list may seem overwhelming. However, school upkeep and marketing is everyone's responsibility, not just the principal or head teacher. Enlist the support of other staff and constituents. Schools that look great and serve constituents well do so because of a team effort.

Enlist the support of your board and church membership to get your facility in shape. Perhaps a parent or home and school leader could help with redecorating or could design and maintain your Web site. (Provide the budget limit in advance so the project doesn't bankrupt the school!)

Enlist the support of your students, too. Let them know there will be a random check of the bathroom many times over a two-week period. Points will be given for each check. If enough points are gained, a reward or special event will be provided for the whole student body. School clean-up can also be part of their community service credit.

The goal, of course, is to help students understand that



a great-looking school brings its own reward! Awareness is the first step.

It's not how large or expensive your school is that makes an impact. A homely little 50-year-old school building can be transformed into an educational wonderland with sparkling windows, shining floors, and eye-catching bulletin boards framing a simple but carefully planned learning environment. Live plants, creative reading centers, special areas of interest—there are a thousand possibilities for the creative teacher. Add to this excellent customer service, and you have a winner!

Remember, if *you* like what you see when you drive up to your school and walk through your front doors, chances are students and parents will, too! ✍