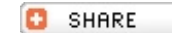


Revolutionary Teaching Methods

Wolftrap fourth-graders are unwittingly involved in real-life lesson about oppression and revolution.

By **Mike DiCicco**

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Dr. Anita Blain seems remarkably calm for a principal about to confront an entire fourth grade that is teetering on the brink of revolt.

The Wolftrap Elementary principal thumbs through a stack of letters she has received from fourth-graders in recent days. The students' appeals are earnest, distraught and sometimes surprisingly thoughtful. "We worked really hard to get them. We earned our Wolfie Bucks, and now they are being taken away," she reads from one letter.

"When you take what we earned, it makes us not want to work as hard," reads another. One student has drawn a rather elaborate analogy between the fourth grade and the state of New Jersey, attempting to illustrate that other grades do not need to share in the fourth grade's currency, but can establish their own reward systems, like New Jersey has its own laws regarding the pumping of gas.

Blain recalls finding fourth-grade teacher Eric Triche's oversized stuffed tiger displayed in the hallway outside his classroom. "I just stuck my head in and said, 'Stuffed tiger in the hallway. Fire code violation. Thirty Wolfie Bucks' tax.'" She smiles.

"Learning occurs best when we connect it to real life," she explains. For the last month or so, Blain and a few Wolftrap teachers have been bringing history to vivid life for the school's fourth-graders, in an unusual lesson about the Revolutionary War. The Wolfie Bucks the students have been earning for good behavior and the performance of classroom tasks, and with which they can purchase toys and stickers from the class store, began to be taxed heavily last month. Assistant Superintendent Phyllis Pajardo made an appearance with Blain to explain to students that the school could not afford more of the special paper on which the money is printed and that the administration would need the bills for next year's classes. Wages dropped. Some students have gone into debt.

The students do not yet realize that their financial oppression is simulated, and they are not pleased with the situation. However, Blain notes, they are learning to use nonviolent means, like petitioning, to assert their rights and resolve conflict. They have also learned to stand up for each other. She reads from another letter: "We heard that you taxed Mr. Triche's class for having a stuffed tiger in the hall. Why would you want to tax them for that? That's not fair."

PERHAPS BLAIN'S CALM is due to the miscommunication that led her to believe the ruse was to be dropped today, that she could finally stop being the bad guy. When she arrives outside the classroom where her address is to be made, Triche informs her that this is not the case.

"You're going to tell them no. Then we're all going to discuss what to do next," he tells her.

"Well," Blain says. "You'll get to see how I do this on the fly."

Triche's classroom, packed with about 90 10-year-olds, rumbles with discontent. As Triche announces the arrival of "Queen Blain," the students hold up signs of protest, and at least one is wearing a sandwich board.

Blain is unfazed. Although she is a diminutive woman, no taller than most of the assembled students, it is clear who is in charge. "I



Photo by Mike DiCicco
Principal Anita Blain, far right, confronts a mob of angry students.



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talked with Mrs. Parjardo again," Blain tells the mob. "There's no money in the school system." She says there is only one ream of green paper left. "What's going to happen when St. Patrick's Day comes and we want to make things with green paper? Do you think you're the only students in this school?" She acknowledges that the students wrote "nice letters. But the bottom line is, I'm the boss. It's not going to work." She turns and strides out the door.

After a moment, the stunned silence evaporates in a chorus of "boos."

"That was unacceptable," Triche agrees. The three fourth-grade teachers have taken the side of the children, working with them — and occasionally prodding them — to escalate their resistance in a civil way.

Moments later, outside the classroom, Triche recalls that the students, at first, did not mind being taxed for the benefit of those who would come after them. "They even wanted to donate their money," he says. "But within a week, they forgot their generosity."

In addition to writing letters, he says, the students also sent a delegation to meet with administrators. They even created their own Fourth Estate. "We had committees of correspondents to communicate between the fourth-grade 'colonies' [classrooms]."

Now, they are going to select another delegation to write up a declaration of refusal.

The students drew many parallels themselves between their situation and what they were learning in history class, Triche reports, recalling a student interrupting a reading in class with, "Hey, that's kind of like it's unfair that we're being taxed." Another asked if the students might send out a delegation like the colonists did. "The kids got so passionate," he says.

As for their parents, he says, "We just got tons of feedback that they were loving it."

THE MEMBERS of Triche's neighboring colonies erupt from his classroom on the way to their own, several chanting, "No way! We won't pay!" They have decided to write a "Declaration of No Taxation," one of them reports.

Three of Triche's students come out to talk to the press.

The taxes, they say, are levied according to how much a student makes. "It's \$2 or \$4 every day, and everybody's going into debt and stuff," says Phillip Stratos.

"Yeah, I'm like \$1 from going into debt," Jack Blair interjects.

Phillip, who still has a bit of a bank account, has been giving Wolfie Bucks to classmates who find themselves in the red. The students say Blain has threatened that those who owe Wolfie Bucks may have to forfeit recesses.

"If we had 1,000 Wolfie Bucks, we wouldn't care," says Mia Hoen-Beck. "Because that would be just like normal, like being an adult." Even on days when they are absent, the tax is taken from students' bank accounts, Mia notes. "That's how severe it is. It's pretty bad." She says taxes have become the primary topic of conversation among fourth-graders.

"All the classes are going crazy," says Phillip. With the high taxes and low wages, he says, when students perform classroom jobs, "we're wasting our time, basically. Some people want to start a rebellion."

"Other people say we should get home-schooled," says Jack.

It did not escape Mia's attention that the taxes began around the time the Revolutionary War unit began. "I started to think, 'Maybe they're just playing a joke on us,'" she says. However, the students have concluded that this is no joke.

Triche pokes his head out from the classroom to tell the students that the class is nominating delegates to help write the declaration. All three volunteer excitedly.

"We were just talking about how serious that could be," Triche warns, noting that he does not know how Blain will react to such audacity. "You could be suspended. You could get all your Wolfie Bucks taken away," he says. "Are you willing to take that risk? Your names will be on it."

Their enthusiasm is not dampened. As Triche goes back to conspiring with his class, the students resume chatting.

THEY FEEL STRONGLY that they are being done an injustice, and they are thrilled to be fighting it together.

"I personally think they're being totally unreasonable, because we had Wolfie Bucks first," says Mia. The taxed Wolfie Bucks, she adds, are "for other classes to have fun and get toys, but we don't get to."

"The other kids can wait until fourth grade," Jack agrees, noting that older students enjoy rights not entitled to fourth-graders. His fifth-grade brother, for example, gets extra recess on Mondays.

"We think the principal was nicer last year," says Phillip.

They float ideas about picketing during recess, printing their own money, setting up a lemonade stand to pay for more green paper. Mia says many students "bring up these crazy ideas that'll get them expelled."

Later that evening, Triche reports that about 15 students were nominated as delegates, but about half of them rescinded their candidacy when the risk of punishment was discussed. The students have learned about colonial revolutionaries who were jailed or executed for their treason.

In addition to the students who refrained from participating for fear of punishment, he says, "one of the really neat things is that, just as with the American Revolution, there are some students that still, even now, sort of support the tax. They don't agree with the declaration."

When the ruse is revealed, he says, his class will go through a "long debriefing," during which he will make sure the students understand that the situation would never have been allowed to escalate into violence and that their principal is not an unreasonable tyrant. "I think the kids will understand," he says.

His students will also be getting their Wolfie Bucks returned, so the class store should be doing good business that week.

Max Dudenhoeffer, from Kathleen Dore's class, says he will sign the declaration, and he is not especially concerned with the consequences. "I don't like it because we made up the Wolfie Bucks and the younger grades didn't," he says. "So we should get to keep them."

Shelby Thomas, one of Emily Simon's students, helped to write the declaration, but cannot say much about it. "All the people who were writing it were sworn to secrecy," she says.

Shelby decided to help with the declaration because she is "actually really mad" about the tax situation. However, she is concerned about the repercussions. "We have the risk of [Blain] getting mad and the risk of getting in trouble. So I'm kind of scared about that," she says. "I'm excited to see what she says."

It is Friday evening, and Monday is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, so the students will have to wait three days to find out what their fate will be.

ON TUESDAY MORNING, Blain has three copies of the declaration, written on mock parchment, sitting on her desk. The document ends forcefully: "Give us freedom from taxation or give us detention." Each copy is signed by several students from one of the fourth-grade classes.

"This shows that teachers don't have to teach to the test," she says of the work the students have done with such zeal.

"Teachers can involve kids in the learning process without workbooks and without paper and pencils. "To me, that's the most amazing part and the most successful part." She notes that no workbook can teach students how to create citizen groups to promote the common good.

Playing the bad guy has been "OK until Friday, when I got booed," says Blain. "That was something. That was painful." She says she prizes the trust of the children but adds, "Sometimes, as leaders, you have to take risks."

In Simon's classroom, the students are again waving their signs of protest in indignation, but their tension is palpable. Most are either giddy or subdued, as Blain makes her entrance.

"I really thought you understood that if I make a decision, as the principal of this school, that's how it stands," she begins, adding that she "can't believe" students would have elected delegates and written a formal declaration against her policies.

"Give us freedom or give us detention?" she quotes incredulously. "I wonder which it's going to be."

She thought the Wolfie Bucks should be shared, she says. "I thought you'd listen but you didn't. Then you started complaining."

"It was their fault," one student peeps.

Blain notes that the tax on Triche's stuffed tiger did not affect the other classes, but they meddled in the business of Triche's class anyway.

"I'll tell you what I think," she finally declares. "I think that you have three awesome teachers, and I think that you are all wonderful students."

The children exchange glances.

"And in a few minutes," Blain continues, "your teachers are going to tell you about the wonderful learning process you have just

lived, because this whole thing has been a role-playing."

Chaos erupts. "I knew it," several students cry. Some are actually pulling at their hair.

"Do we get our Wolfie Bucks back?" a boy shouts over the din.

"Yeah, seriously," says another.

Blain compliments the students for effort, their organization, their concern for each other and the many solutions they suggested in their letters. In a disagreement, she says, finding solutions is "what it's all about."

Triche tells the students that all of their parents have been in on the trick.

"My dad set me up?" a student cries.

There are now some decisions to be made, Triche says. For example, "Do we give the taxes back only to those who were willing to sign the declaration, who were willing to give something up?"

One thing the students should agree upon, says Simon, is "how fabulous your principal is."

Applause breaks out.

AS BLAIN LEAVES, several students share their reactions.

"It was creepy," says Peter Alvarez.

"It was really fun, though," says Tommy Surdu. "I can't wait to tell my mom."

Lindsey Tyrrell insists she knew it was a trick all along. "What a coincidence," she says of the timing between the taxes and the history lessons.

"I think it was awesome," says Alex Dondershine, before changing his mind: "It was horrible, because she tricked us, and it wasn't fair."

Aidan Clotworthy says he "thought it was kind of obvious" because he never believed the teachers could get into trouble with the principal. However, he has learned that "taxes can be pretty harsh," he adds. "Taxes were really harsh in colonial times."

"I thought it was a good life experience, because you never know what's going to happen, and this has happened before," says Stephen Bonacci.

Simon has already begun discussing events of the past month with her class. "How many of you are feeling kind of outraged because you believed it all this time?" she asks.

Several hands are raised, but probably not as many as there ought to be.



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