



THE POWER OF TRADITION

School traditions build
community and create fertile
ground for achievement

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What do we remember most about our student days? It may be a favorite teacher or professor, mastering a particular challenge, discovering new ideas or meeting a lifelong friend or mentor. Certainly these moments are an important part of our lives as learners. But most of us have equally vivid memories of the school traditions we experienced, rituals that have more to do with our identity as a larger group than our achievements as individuals. Chances are, we still can name our grade school mascot or recall a high school event or college tradition just as well as any lesson we learned.

Indeed, these traditions not only connect the past with the present, they create a common identity and allegiance to a school community. In this way, simple traditions can be an overlooked but valuable component in nurturing a climate of achievement.

DEFINING TRADITION IN AN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

School-wide traditions encompass a broad—and often unusual—range of activities and events. In most secondary schools and universities, traditions include school songs, colors, mascots and activities that are experienced at the start of the school year, occur at events throughout the year, and culminate in the most common and well-known of all school traditions: the graduation ceremony.

Some traditions are tied to history, such as the Armistice Day flagpole event that the Milton Academy in Massachusetts has been holding since World War I. And then there's Florida State University's "Sod Cemetery," a burial ground of turf brought back from memorable road victories. At Buffalo Grove High School in Illinois, seniors hold a fundraiser and present a class gift to the school every year—a sculpture, a much-needed piece of equipment, or the planting of a native tree.

A school may be known for a particular academic strength, an educational philosophy or a rich history. But what distinguishes tradition from these qualities is that they are often non-academic, inclusive of many students and tied to the larger community—alumni,

parents, administrators and even local businesses—to create a stronger school identity and a community supportive of that school's mission.

IN MASSACHUSETTS, TRADITIONS FOSTER FAMILIARITY

Educational researchers have not studied school traditions extensively; a surprising dearth of information exists, given how integral tradition can be to student life. But one not-for-profit organization, the Northeast Foundation for Children, is dedicated to promoting academic growth through school community building. In *Familiar Ground: Traditions That Build Community*, the foundation's staff attempts to document the impact of school traditions on one independent elementary school—the Greenfield Center School in Massachusetts. One of the book's contributors, Roxanne Kriete, argues that tradition brings familiarity and comfort to the school environment, a necessary component of learning:

"[Students] feel that they are on familiar ground. Learning about each other through traditions like All-School Meeting...builds our community. In the spaces where we feel most comfortable, we are able to offer the gifts and venture the risks that the best learning requires."¹



In addition to Greenfield’s unique, all-school meetings—a daily tradition filled with song—the school holds an annual “name the school” event. In this contest, students organize into multi-age teams and attempt to literally name every student in the school. At this time, the school was smaller (only 180 students). But Greenfield’s teachers found that there were few better ways to create a sense of inclusiveness and safety that helped students stretch beyond their “comfort zone” in discussion and other academic contexts. In the same way, their “all-school games day”—a weekly half hour of outdoor game playing among mixed student groups—creates routine and strong student relationships that facilitate learning.

TRADITION AS A CATALYST FOR LEARNING

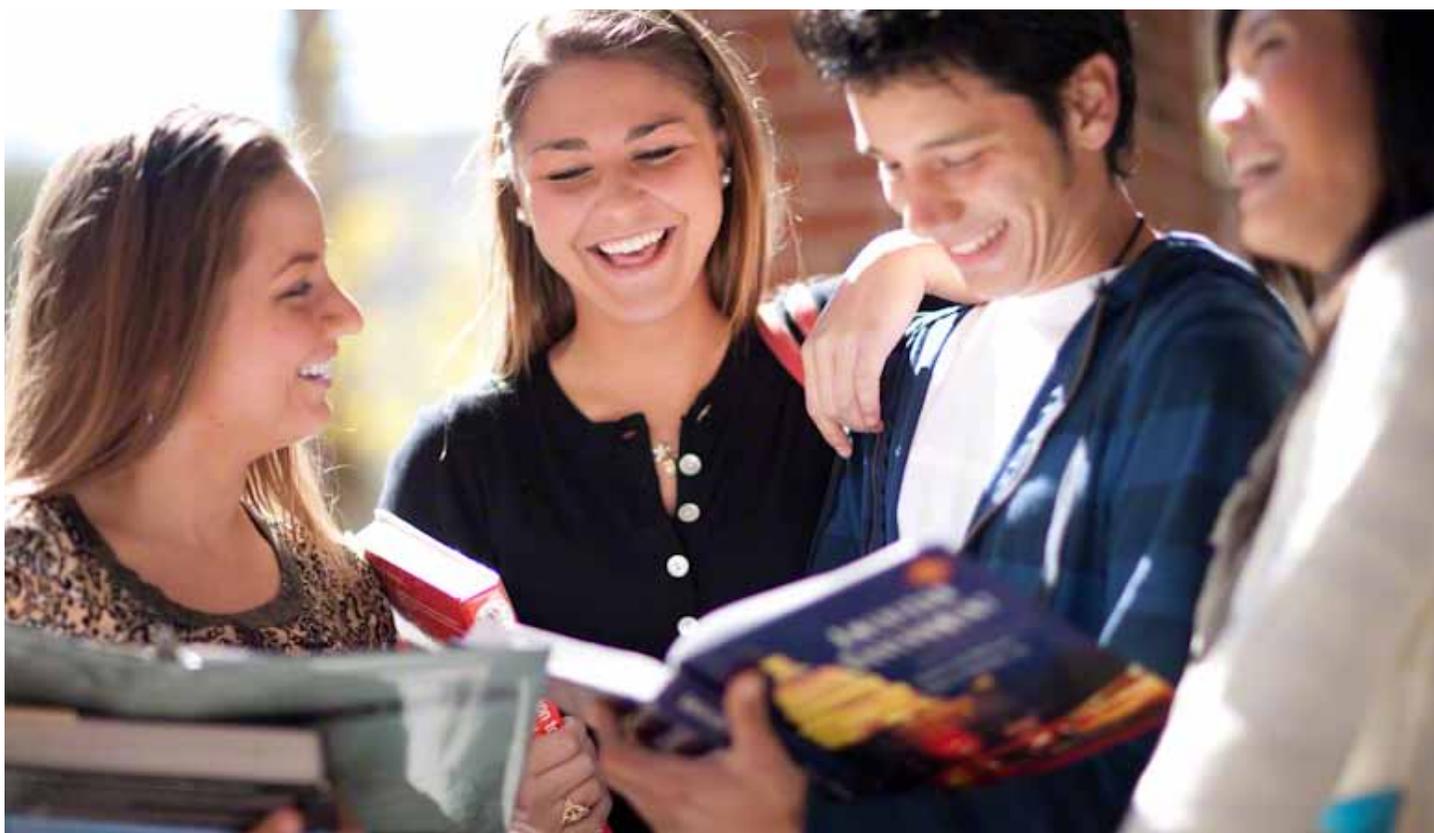
For Mike Smith, school traditions are more than just a part of high school. They are why students come to class in the first place.

“We’re developing a tradition of dropping out because we believe that education happens only in the classroom,” Smith says. “Other activities are seen as only the frills of the school experience, but when you start cutting activities, there are no reasons for the kids to be there.”²

Smith is a motivation expert with years of experience working with educators to found DifferenceMakers, Ltd. Through an ongoing partnership with Herff Jones Inc., DifferenceMakers provides secondary schools with programs that promote leadership and character development, personal responsibility, teacher and staff appreciation, school spirit and student retention.

Smith believes that strong traditions must be woven into the fabric of schools to ensure students gain more from the experience than simply grades. “Look at the root of humans. We’re social beasts who like to hang out in groups. We all want to be part of something bigger than ourselves,” Smith says. He notes that school traditions—ranging from an annual class rite or activity to the wearing of caps and gowns on graduation day—are synonymous with education because, he says, “Education is based on relationships.”

Traditions that unify students and build bonds with their teachers, coaches and advisors are important because they foster interpersonal relationship-building and reinforce the concept of contributing to something bigger than the individual. Smith explains that traditions afford extra learning opportunities outside the classroom and believes that the time students spend focusing on cocurricular activities like the



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traditional pre-game bonfire or annual community clean-ups is critical to lowering the national dropout rate.

“Nearly half of dropouts are not flunking out,” Smith says. “They just don’t see any reason to come into the classroom when the social groups they are a part of are outside of school.” An atmosphere of solid school tradition, he says, would go a long way toward preventing the rise of street gangs that prey upon the young adults’ quest for social acceptance.

Interestingly, the very word “tradition” may have negative connotations to high school students. “Tradition is not a word that kids like,” Smith says. “They like the expectations, but not the word. Likewise, the word ‘pageantry’ is an old-fashioned word, but look at the size of the viewing audience for the Olympic Games opening ceremony!”

Instead, Smith uses another term when talking with today’s students. “Esprit is what holds clubs together. It’s the expectation for something significant and important,” he says. “It’s about personal responsibility.”

Creating esprit within the school environment requires a faculty willing to dedicate time and resources outside the classroom with the expectation of turning this extra time with students into powerful and lasting teaching moments.

WHERE ESPRIT MEETS TEST SCORES

Some high schools are aware of the power of this esprit to help boost academic achievement. In Middletown, Delaware, for example, St. Georges Technical High School has added a new tradition to existing ones like Spirit Week or the Fall Celebration. The Spring Rally was devised by a student/faculty committee to motivate students to study harder for the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP).³

The event features student/faculty competitions and other activities designed to promote higher proficiency on the state tests. A fall field day was also included as added incentive for the students. The event proved successful in boosting the school’s DSTP rating in 2010 and has already become a highly anticipated prelude to the test—as well as proof that the best traditions incorporate both students and faculty, and deliver learning benefits that can be difficult to achieve solely in the classroom.

A RING AND A PROMISE IN FLORIDA

In Florida’s Dade County, a tradition is helping to keep motivation strong and students on track toward graduation.

Without much effort or cost, several high schools discovered a way to transform a student’s decision to own a class ring into a larger event that puts focus on achievement by organizing a formal ring presentation ceremony.

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Students dress up and invite parents and extended family. Students as well as teachers and administrators give short speeches, and then the rings are presented to the students who place them on their fingers in unison. The long awaited moment is then followed by a celebratory balloon drop, or whatever fanfare the school chooses to mark the conclusion of the presentation. The event has grown in popularity among students and brought more parents into the school. The tradition began in 1998 at South Dade High School with one ring ceremony and ten kids. Today there are 150 students and almost 100 parents who attend. The event features a prom-like atmosphere, but it's about celebrating achievement.

That focus on achievement stems from the underlying message of the ring ceremony, reinforced throughout the planning and repeated in the event's speeches: the ring is more than a token of high school days. Principals tell students that it's their commitment to graduating — that they are one step closer. The year engraved next to the stone means they will have earned a diploma in that year and can wear the ring with pride.

Another aspect of the ring ceremony is its ability to involve a wide variety of students in both the planning process and the event itself. The faculties at the Dade County schools have noticed that students from many different social groups want to be part of the ceremony. This participation helps to maintain school spirit from class to class, and school year to school year.

ON FRIDAY NIGHTS, A BELOVED BUT VANISHING TRADITION

The traditions surrounding high school football games could constitute their own genre of school tradition, and few pass through high school without catching a

bit of the school spirit that these events can inspire. But in the football-mad region of Western Pennsylvania, these traditions do more than just create loyalty and school spirit—they help keep small, economically struggling communities together.

Small, former steel mill towns—Monaca, Clairton, Jeannette, Stowe and many others—have storied football teams and traditions that permeate the community. But smaller public high schools across the nation are disappearing, faced with mergers into larger districts due to shrinking enrollment and financial constraints. The recent closure of Monaca's small high school, and the end of its legendary football traditions, reveals just how critical school traditions can be to a fragile community's health.

Before Monaca was closed and merged with Central Valley, town residents walked to the stadium, held parties and packed the restaurants. The most well known and beloved of their traditions was the “Bridge Game,” a game with rival Rochester that earned naming rights to the bridge spanning the Ohio River. The bridge would then become either the Rochester-Monaca Bridge, or vice versa.

“The Bridge Game was the hardest tradition to lose,” Monaca mayor John Antoline reported to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “There was always a parade, always so much talk. When guys talk about playing football, that's always what you hear about.”⁴

“If we lose our school, our football team, a big part of our identity would be gone...just like when U.S. Steel closed,” Clairton mayor Richard Lattanzi told the



Post-Gazette. Another resident described it as “the last remaining piece of our pride and dignity.”

Sto-Rox High School in Stowe Township is in one of the most financially troubled districts, but for now “the circle” tradition still continues, where cheerleaders gather in the end zone by the band and perform a dance routine that has not changed for generations. In Northgate, the beloved old Bellevue High School bell is still rung once for each point scored by the Flames.

In these communities, most residents are natives, they know the athletes, the cheerleaders and the band musicians by their first names. The parades down main street, the games, dances and other traditions have been carried on over three generations. Churches organize fish fries around the games, and people gather on nearby front lawns or local watering holes before and after. Most can walk to the downtown stadiums. Merging schools usually means a drive for many

students and families of the closed school, eliminating much of this socializing and leaving local restaurants, salons and other businesses with a much lighter crowd. However, despite the loss of tradition in Monaca—and the threat of mergers and bankruptcy in other towns across America—students and their communities are adapting. The larger districts that absorb these students generally have newer technology, more space and revamped curriculums. According to the authors of *Familiar Ground*, school traditions, and the achievement they indirectly promote, can develop despite dramatic change:

The community whose needs we are meeting doesn't get defined once and stay that way. Some changes are predictable and foreseen, others swoop upon us...the specifics don't so much matter. What does matter is the commitment to make time and space for the hard work and great rewards of an all-school community life.⁵

Preserving old school traditions links students to a school's past, and places them within the continuum of its own history as well as local, regional or national history. But new traditions serve a purpose as well, addressing the changing, dynamic needs of students and their communities. Regardless of their origin, school traditions serve to make a school a living entity with an identity, and not merely a building that each class passes through. Traditions increase student pride, allegiance and even their own sense of inclusion—qualities that help create the necessary conditions for engagement and achievement.

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ABOUT HERFF JONES

Herff Jones works closely with customers to create a climate of achievement through graduation products, class rings and jewelry, yearbooks, educational publishing and motivation and recognition tools. The company provides guidance, support and high quality products to elementary schools, high schools, colleges and universities, church organizations, professional and collegiate sports teams and corporations. Founded nearly 100 years ago in Indianapolis, Indiana, Herff Jones is an employee-owned organization focused on building long-term relationships through a nationwide network of trusted, expert sales representatives. Additional information is available at herffjones.com.



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