

POINTS OF VIEW

Power Rangers unwelcome for show-and-tell

Years back, it was a pretty fair bet that a young child's favorite holiday gift would show up in the first week in January as his subject for Show and Tell.

Not necessarily so today, I discovered during a recent trip to a local elementary school.

The visit was prompted by a piece in the New York Times about restrictions on what children in some New York-area elementary and pre-schools can bring in for Show and Tell.

I wanted to find out whether rules against bringing in toy weapons and Power Rangers also were in effect here "in America's heartland" as the national media is wont to say about any state between the two coasts.

And to tell the truth, I wanted to see how a teaching tool so old as Show and Tell had survived the computer age.

The brand new Gretchko Elementary School in the West Bloomfield School District seemed the perfect choice. This "mini-school" lodges only kinder-

garten and first grade. As it turns out, that's the playground for Show and Tell.

Principal Sally Drummond believes the basis for Show and Tell is as sound today as it was in the past.

"It's for children to have a chance to present to an entire class who they are and what they are," she said.

Each teacher handles it a little differently, Drummond explains. Some integrate it into their curriculum; others do a more traditional version.

But, yes, the ban on toy weapons is in play in our communities. Drummond sent home a note early in the school year to that effect.

"They can bring in the Power Rangers, although we don't encourage it," she added. In fact, as you'll soon see, they don't encourage bringing in toys.

In Marsha Bloom's first grade, Show and Tell takes the form of Hide and Guess. Her rules are that "It can't be a toy, but something that tells you about them."



JUDITH DONER BERNE

This day Allie Shafraan has hidden something brought from home in a special "Me Bucket." And she has developed clues for her classmates to guess what it is.

"You can listen to it," Allie says. "It's round and it comes in a case." Wrong answers include a radio, tape, seashell and drum. It turns out to be a CD she especially likes.

In Kim Daniel's first grade, Julian Anderson displays one roller blade and

one ice skate. He explains that the roller blade is new, and although the skate is old, he has new laces.

He asks for questions and gets both questions and comments from the class.

Elena Black shows off a decorative coffee tin, we find out she received from "my grandma." It is decorated with pictures of Queen Victoria, and we also find out via a question from Mrs. Daniels that Victoria is Elena's middle name and that her family comes from Canada.

Gary Ahern also brings in something that reveals his family background. It's a model car he got at General Motors where his dad works in automotive design. "It's not a toy — it says so on the box," Gary explains.

Here, too, "They're not supposed to bring in toys, but something that reflects their interest or something they've made," Mrs. Daniels says.

"They do love it — each one is assigned a day."

But they can speak for themselves. Sejal Virani says its fun to share things with your friends. Stephanie Schultz says it's fun to ask questions. And to Marcus Bowen, "It's cool."

In Laura Rosin's kindergarten, Show and Tell reflects the letter of the week. "B" inevitably brings in a lot of stuffed bears. "M" might provoke displaying the tooth they lost.

"I think it's so important," Rosin says. "Kids think they're bringing a part of themselves to school."

As I headed out for some last minute holiday shopping, I thought about how we can add to this school's message.

Our gifts to children should also help them discover who and what they are. Happy holidays.

Judith Doner Berne, a West Bloomfield resident, is former managing editor of the *Eccentric Newspapers*. You can leave her a voice mail message at (313)953-2047, ext. 1997 or write or fax a letter to the editor in care of this newspaper.

Charter schools are parochiaid by another name

Sensational! Scoop! Zowie! Stop the presses! The astounding, incredible news is that a public school district is seeking to convert all five of its buildings to public school academies, aka "charter schools."

The unusual development is occurring in Montebella district, amidst the potato farms of Edmore in Montcalm County.

Why unusual? Because this is what charters were intended to be — specialized schools within a public school system. Michigan has been misusing the concept, lashing charters to private and sectarian schools so that they can slip around the state Constitution's prohibition of vouchers and parochiaid.

In a paper called "Charter Schools Laws across the United States" and published by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, Sandra Vergari and Dr. Michael Mintrom assign credit to Ray Budde, a professor of school administration, with bringing forth the charter idea in 1988 in (of all things) an educators' journal. They add:

"The charter schools idea was advanced by Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, in a 1988 appearance before the National Press Club. Shanker argued that charter schools would increase 'choice within the public schools system without undermining it.' (Italics added.)

Amazing, isn't it? A union president's idea being picked up by Michigan's religious right and its gofers, Gov. John Engler, Senate majority leader Dick Posthumus and State Board of Education president Clark Durant!

In truth, Michigan public school districts have been setting up alternative specialized schools for



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a long, long time. In the 1920s, my father learned printing at such a school in Detroit, called Cass Tech. Suburban districts like Livonia and Walled Lake long have had alternative programs for "lunk" students who dropped out earlier for whatever reason.

The unusual feature of Montebella plan is that the entire district will be composed of charter schools. Some observers (see Phil Power's column) raise an eyebrow at making all five buildings charter schools. Whatever the merits, the idea that a public school district is going the charter route is astounding news.

What we usually are (mis)treated to in Michigan is this story from the Iosco County News Herald in Oscoda about Pinecrest Academy.

It seems the health department shut down Pinecrest, a private school housed, for whatever reason, in Lighthouse Baptist Church. The health inspector "could not conduct inspections at the

church and therefore could not issue written approval for operating the school," the paper reported.

It was the second time Pinecrest ran afoul of the authorities. The state fire marshal shut down its operation in Cooley Plaza of Baldwin Township.

So what will Pinecrest Academy do now? First, said administrator Elizabeth Baldwin, "We are going temporarily to home schooling while we're working on getting another building." She and staff members will travel to students' homes, though not every day, to teach parents how to work with the materials.

Second, the administrator is shopping around between universities to see if one will grant it charter school status in order to get state aid. So what we're most likely to get is yet another private school in line for a government bailout.

Week after week, the list of charter abuse stories grows: Noah Webster, Academy of Detroit, Trivalley and a church's dummy corporation in Muskegon, and now Pinecrest.

It's as if John Engler and pals had their fingers crossed on Jan. 1, 1995, when they took an oath of office that began: "I do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the constitution of this state. . . ."

"They ignore the plain language of the Michigan Constitution: 'No public monies or property shall be appropriated or paid or any public credit utilized, by the legislature or any other political subdivision or agency of the state directly or indirectly to aid or maintain any private, denominational or other nonpublic, pre-elementary, elementary or secondary school.'"

The rhetoric about choice, competition, parental control, non-traditional programs, and educational diversity is window dressing. The name of the charter game is tax money for private and sectarian schools.

Tim Richard reports on the local implications of state and regional events.

Charter schools question: who's accountable to whom

Now comes Randy Bos, superintendent of Montebella Community Schools, who wants to convert all five schools in his tiny (1,600 students) mid-Michigan district into charter schools.

Pardon me, but up to now I had thought that local school boards and superintendents were supposed to take responsibility and accountability for what kids learn without having to convert their public school districts into charter schools. Or am I missing something?

Charter schools are an experiment in school reform that authorizes independent schools to receive the same amount of per-pupil funding that is provided regular public schools in the region. There are now about 40 such schools operation in Michigan, with another 20 or so authorized to open next year.

The theory is that chartering some independent schools would break the monopoly on K-12 education now held by public schools, provoke experimentation and provide parents with greater school choice. I'm afraid the fact is that lots of folks who are hot for charter schools want little more than to get your and my tax dollars to pay for private schooling for their kids.

I think allowing uncontrolled numbers of charter schools poses two enormous problems:

■ Financial oversight. Remember, the per-pupil grant paid to charter schools comes from public tax dollars. But boards of charter schools are privately appointed rather than publicly elected. How do you get public oversight of the expenditure of public funds?

■ Educational standards. With a lot of kids attending a bunch of independent charter schools, how do you know that each kid is getting an education that's up to standard? The Senate was adamant in wanting to do away with the mandated statewide curriculum, and so Michi-



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gan is now one of only three states in the nation with no — none! — minimum standards for what our kids are supposed to learn in school.

It's ironic that the scores for this year's round of MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) tests were released last week. In general, they showed that most school districts have improved in reading and math over the past few years as teachers began to adjust their classes to meet the demands of public testing.

We regularly publish the local MEAP test results, school building by school building, in this newspaper. Nothing we do gets a bigger response from our readers, and this kind of intense interest translates — surprise! — into pressure for school improvement.

So the process — testing what kids learn, publishing those results in local newspapers like this one and letting pressure to improve work its way on teachers and school officials — gradually is improving our schools.

Isn't that the kind of responsibility and accountability that we've been expecting from the public schools all along?

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 863-2047, Ext. 1880.

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