

Preface

As this book is written, the world finds itself in “another fine mess,” as the portly Mr. Oliver Hardy of *Laurel & Hardy* fame would say. Newspapers are filled with grim news. Television, radio, magazines, the Internet, and other media remind us regularly of American military and civilian casualties, orange alerts, terrorism plots, deadly hurricanes, worldwide warming, massive national debt, natural catastrophes, and the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. There is little room left for joy.

Schools in particular are becoming humorless places of high-stakes testing, ruthless competition, mandatory grade retention, and potential or real violence. Students are becoming nervous, depressed, angry, and aggressive. Teachers are feeling overburdened with the demand to “leave no child behind,” while striving to meet requirements for higher student performance on standardized tests.

In her 2005 book *Joyful Classrooms*, Sally (Sarah) Butzin points out that mandatory retention of students is a constant threat. It hangs over each child’s head like the sword of Damocles, hanging from the ceiling by a single hair. Butzin reports that we now have some children facing their third year in a grade because they could not pass one or more tests.

Heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing has resulted in a narrow curriculum. Teachers are forced to “teach to

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the test." A growing number of schools have been placed on "watch lists" or labeled as "at risk" or "failing" by local, state, and federal agencies. Adding to the threat of academic failure, schools are terrified over the possibility of being labeled by the No Child Left Behind legislation as "persistently dangerous," the scarlet letter of the education community. Most educators would rather have their school labeled "academically failing" than "persistently dangerous."

Average classroom teachers, who are already overburdened, are expected to teach at-risk and mainstreamed children, raise standards, show AYP (annual yearly progress), and at the same time prevent students from dropping out. Perhaps never before in American education has there been a more pervasive feeling of unhappiness and gloom. More good teachers are leaving the teaching profession because of joyless conditions. There is a great need for laughter, fun, and cheerfulness in classrooms and schools.

An overlooked gold mine of classroom humor and fun may be found in the contributions of class clowns. These impresarios of classroom entertainment have been almost totally neglected in the professional education literature. Hundreds of books, if not thousands, have been written about gifted and talented students. A similar number have been written about children with special needs. Yet almost nothing has been written on how to understand class clowns and appreciate their contributions. The same is true when it comes to teaching class clowns.

The neglect of class clowns is also apparent in books on humor written for larger audiences. In the comprehensive reference book *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor* (Nilsen & Nilsen), published in 2002, there is not a single reference to class clowns. The same is true of the *Random House Webster's Wit and Humor*

Quotationary (Frank), published in 2000. It is time to correct this situation by giving class clowns the recognition and appreciation they deserve.

Class clowns help meet the need for cheerfulness through their energy, sense of humor, and playful spirit. They encourage us to laugh more and live longer. They inspire us with their love of life. Class clowns invite us to take a more lighthearted approach to living.

A middle school teacher provided an example of how a class clown can brighten a classroom. She was being observed by the principal (another state mandate), and, to impress the principal with her pedagogical skills, the teacher demonstrated a math process and then asked, "Does anyone know why I performed this function?" The resident class clown instantly responded, "Yeah. It's because the principal's sitting there." Later, the teacher and principal had a big laugh over the clown's response.

This book identifies four signature tendencies of class clowns. These tendencies are similar to Martin Seligman's signature strengths, described in his 2002 book *Authentic Happiness*. Signature tendencies are special characteristics that class clowns value and seek to practice every day. These tendencies provide valuable clues as to how teachers can be successful in understanding, appreciating, and teaching class clowns. Equally important, this book describes what class clowns can teach us about living a more cheerful life, personally and professionally.

Information presented in *Teaching Class Clowns* is gained from three primary sources. The first source is my own experience as a class clown. I can never remember a time when I was not hooked on humor. By the time I was sixty months old, I was totally committed to clowning.

The second source is a large-scale research study of class clowns conducted at the University of Florida. Dr. Sandra Damico and I studied 96 class clowns identified from a population of 3,500 eighth-grade public school

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students. Details of our research appeared in *The American Educational Research Journal* (Damico & Purkey, 1979).

The third source is my review of the life history of professional comedians, both classic and contemporary. In virtually every case, professional comedians began their careers as class clowns. According to Steve Allen, author of *The Funny Men*, if you are not a class clown by the time you are twelve years old, don't even think about becoming a professional comedian.

This book is not designed to help people become class clowns. Rather, *Teaching Class Clowns* provides teachers and others with an understanding and appreciation of a very special and talented group of students. It identifies effective ways to teach class clowns.

Equally important, this book suggests what class clowns can teach us. My hope is that *Teaching Class Clowns* will invite a more joyful, optimistic, fun-filled, humane, and caring environment for everyone in and around schools.