



Brother Robb in the Reading Tent with kindergarten students.

One More Lesson

by Brother Robb Wallace, FSC, Principal

20

I could not help noticing as I looked around at the group of Saint Joe third graders that all of them were violating the dress code. Yes it was after school, but the code distinctly says that all students must have their shirts tucked in while on campus.

"Why," I asked in my most authoritative voice, "aren't your shirts tucked in?" Junior Vargas squinted up at me as he pushed handfuls of polo shirt into his pants and answered with his own question, "You haven't been a principal very long, have you?"

Startled, confused, and a little guilty, I replied, "Why do you say that?" Still tucking in his shirt with one hand and scratching his buzz-cut moon head with the other, he let me have it, "Cuz principals don't ask. They tell!"

It was just one more lesson that this untried principal had to store away for future reference. It has been that way since I arrived in June: lesson on top of lesson, heaped up and overflowing.

I learned nothing ever happens as quickly as I want it to. I arrived in Sunnyside, Washington with a single mandate: get the place ready to open in September. That was no easy task, considering the run-down state of the facility.

The shoestring budget on which the school had operated for several years did not allow for maintenance. Most of the systems were broken or sputtering along with makeshift repairs. The 70 days I had to get things up and running nagged me. With our very first project, I realized I could not control how quickly projects would be completed: re-keying – pretty straightforward, right? Not in Sunnyside. Days stretched into weeks, and still the work was not done. At the end

fact: in this small rural community, the people knew who I was, but I did not know them. Plus, it seemed that they were all related to one another. The culture in the school was different, too. The energy level was very high; kids didn't get hurt, they got boo-boos; when they lined up, they often held hands with one another; and the decorations on the bulletin boards changed with the seasons.

When you put all this in the context of a school that had been plagued for years with financial difficulties, you find teachers who have learned to make do, who go without, who buy school supplies from their own salaries. Teachers pitch in and volunteer for every project that comes along; the kids

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Yolanda Flores' drawing of her fifth grade class.

of August, I knew that my options were to blow my top (and still not have the job done) or try to expedite things with threats (and still not have the job done) or accept the fact that the year would begin without everything in place. I chose the third option, and the facility is now re-keyed. But it did not happen on my timetable.

Another lesson I learned was to approach the experience as a student. You have to understand the demographics here: 99% Catholic; 91% Latino; 78% qualified for free or reduced-price meals; and 55% of families qualified for tuition assistance. Another alarming

view the school as an extension of their families; parents are willing partners in the education of their children. I had to learn how to be in this place. With this learning has come great appreciation and love.

Another lesson learned is that these children are God's gift to me. It is a lesson that Saint John Baptist de La Salle would approve of, but one which many of us forget in the craziness of education. As gifts, the children are joy, surprise, and a source of thanksgiving.

There are the obvious joys like the kindergarten girl who makes a point of saying she loves me each day; the sixth grade boy who trusts that I will have answers to all his family problems; and the parade of first graders moving past my office window – waving and smiling – on their way to P.E.

The surprise gifts are equally frequent: the graduate who comes back to say, "Saint Joe changed my

and parents as they arrive. The Murillos – Salvador, Michael, and Alvaro – always greet me warmly. They greet me warmly even when it is cold outside. One morning, Salvador came to me, lifted my arm, and put it around his shoulders. I am used to Salvador's affectionate nature, but this was a bit much, even for him. When I would remove my arm, he would put it back. Finally, I asked him what was

encounter changes our lives, too. Junior was right. I have not been a principal very long. But it has been long enough for me to be grateful to a loving God for giving Me a chance to meet Him anew. ☒

The picture below was drawn by Emmanuel Ramos, a fourth grader at Saint Joseph.



What does St. Joseph mean to You?

We asked fourth and fifth grade students at St. Joseph to tell us in a picture what St. Joseph means to them. The primary theme that all the pictures we received portrayed was the positive learning environment present at St. Joseph.

life," the distant tinkle of laughter as the second graders enjoy their recess, the group hugs kindergartners like to give.

But it is as a source of thanksgiving that I most frequently encounter the children, as the following story illustrates: I have made it a habit to be in front of the school every morning for about half an hour to say hello to the students

going on, and he responded, "I left my coat at home. Today you are my coat."

I could not keep from thanking a wise God who has given us – the Lasallian Family – a chance to be a coat to Salvador and to this school. However, unlike a cloth coat, we benefit from the wear. We are given a unique opportunity to encounter Jesus in this place and in the faces of these children. And this