



PEOPLE

# ARE ZEALOTS GOOD FOR SCHOOLS?

Dennis Sleigh says there's a difference to being enthusiastic and taking things too far

I suspect that most people appreciate enthusiasm but it is a short distance between enthusiasm and fanaticism – and once that line is crossed, we have real problems. Today, when so many people – professionals, parents, pressure groups and politicians – seem anxious to reform schooling, it is easy to find enthusiasts, and it is inevitable that some of these are borderline fanatics. For a Principal, it is distressing to find the person whom you were counting on to support your desire for change is really marching to a different drum: your projected step towards organised progress is merely their initial move towards total reconstruction. Not everyone on your side is really your ally.

It was Theodore Roosevelt who said

that “every reform movement has a lunatic fringe” and there are probably few people today who would disagree. Whether we were discussing the 2017 plebiscite or the dual nationality problem, the fate of off-shore detainees or the sexual abuse of young children, Australians last year had the chance to back many important debates, and many commentators used avenues such as the ABC’s comment page or their own Facebook page to express their opinions. Sadly, although large numbers shared their feelings with dignity, there always seemed to be a small but vocal band who wanted to take the debates to an extreme position. I have sometimes wondered whether these same people would be as rude, as insensitive or as arrogant

in face-to-face confrontations, and sadly I have a few reasons to believe that some would. One of those reasons is that even when ideas are raised in school meetings, it is not unknown for someone to border on the extreme when responding. Their comments can really place a meeting Chairperson in a dilemma. Before we go on to look at how the resulting challenge might be handled, a few more thoughts on this unwanted zealotry would be useful.

Because I want to contrast enthusiasts from zealots, it would be useful to start with some explanations of each term, as least as I understand them. An enthusiast is a person who seems to have some passion for a particular viewpoint and is prepared to advance that vision by personal

effort. This is a loose description, and purposely so. I think of an enthusiast as a person wanting to progress a cause in order to obtain benefits for various stakeholders. I could imagine, for example, a teacher who wants to see greater emphasis on cultural events in a school program and who is sufficiently driven by this idea that he or she would help develop relevant ideas, sell them to the authorities, engage in the resultant work to implement these ideas and then play a role in maintaining the process into the future. Such a person – and thankfully our schools are full of them – would acknowledge a world of difference between conceiving an idea and actually implementing it and would accept some responsibility for advancing the idea.

A zealot is a different type of person, but would share many of the same qualities. The usual dictionary definition mentions a fanaticism and a lack of compromise in pursuing certain ideals, and while most dictionaries link this to religious or political matters, there is nothing to say that such people cannot cast their nets wider. The fundamental difference between the enthusiast and the zealot is their fervour. Indeed, it could be suggested that this difference in degree of keenness is what turns a valued supporter into a time-wasting and energy-consuming nuisance.

Early in my teaching career, there seemed to be a burst of information about dyslexia and many parents in my area decided this ailment was the reason their child could not read. Credit is due to the researchers who collectively developed this discovery, but I wonder if their efforts were impeded by over-anxious parents (and not a few teachers) who felt that in this research lay the single explanation for reading failure. I remember one parent in particular who not only applied this knowledge to her own children – as indeed was her right – but also set out to convince other parents that this discovery also explained *their* children's reading problems. I would say that by doing so she managed to alienate a large number of people who might otherwise have gained some useful knowledge from the work of experts and she also antagonised many teachers. Her enthusiasm had become a mania and so an ally turned into an adversary.

Elsewhere, I witnessed a compara-

## Being enthusiastic

### Avoid negative people

Your role as leader means this is not always possible, but at least try to move most of the time in circles where people are more positive.

### Smile, don't snarl

Few of us think of ourselves as snarlers, but sometimes we can be deluded. No matter how cheerful we are inside, do we project this on the outside?

### Be positive

We meet disappointments daily, but when sharing our day, recall instead the wonderful people and events we have witnessed. Can't find any? Look harder.

### Communicate good news

No-one appreciates "fake news" but as the old song says "Always look on the bright side of life" and use newsletters and addresses to report on these positive items.

### Prioritise people over policies

We have to follow system policies and procedures, but let us show our community we place greater value on serving our people than on following rules blindly.

### Accept other people's ideas warmly

Even when we cannot implement the ideas put forward, let us always assure our "ideas people" that we have listened carefully and gratefully to what they say.

### Be sincere

If we are two-faced, we cannot inspire enthusiasm; let us show others that we are honest in dealing with everyone, especially with the students.

### Learn to relax

Leading a school is hard work – and we cannot keep going 24-7. We need to stop, to smell the roses, and to pamper ourselves and our families to retain enthusiasm.

### Know you make a difference

As a school leader, you matter greatly to a lot of people; remember this and realise that you can help them most when you are positive.

### Be gentle with yourself

We all have our critics, and they can be very forceful. Fortunately, we also have our admirers, even if false humility stops us hearing them. Listen to lovers, not loathers.

ble situation when a proponent of public speaking and debating managed to offend a significant portion of the parent body by setting up an unnecessary conflict between his favoured topic and the strong local support for interschool sport. The school was happy to endorse both interests but this zealous parent set up an either-or dichotomy and predictably, the parents opted for the retention of sport. An enthusiast for wider education was thus hindered from bringing about a useful change of emphasis – a change that could easily have pleased most parents had there been any balance in the process.

### Identifying enthusiasts

In our early dealings, we can easily see fanatics simply as people with lots of enthusiasm and it is only when we embrace

their ideas that we realise that they are people who constantly go too far; to mistake one for the other can be disastrous. Likewise, we sometimes dismiss an enthusiast because we have had previous challenges from fanatics, but if we are dismissive here, we could be loser – the gentler, more balanced enthusiast might be just what we need to clear the next hurdle or to implement the next dream.

No-one wants to mistake an enthusiast for a fanatic, and so it is useful to reflect on just what it is that makes a person enthusiastic. Above all, an enthusiast is someone who brings to an encounter an engaging spirit that helps to enliven the situation. Enthusiasts are not necessarily the group leaders, but fanatics will commonly assume such a role, in order to bring about their "total vision". The interpersonal skills

of the fanatic are less developed – they are often egotists – and it might be said that an enthusiast appreciates while a zealot deprecates. Hence, when a fanatic hears a musical performance, they point out that the soprano missed three of the high notes in the second movement while an enthusiast wipes away tears as the music ends and says “Wasn’t that a moving rendition?”

To summarise this rather simplistic delineation, an enthusiast has an open vision, a caring personality and a sense of balance; a fanatic has a plan that brooks no opposition or amendment and forces this viewpoint on all who are prepared to listen, unaware of the views or feelings of others. It is easy to see why we like enthusiasts but rightly fear fanatics. Let us never forget, however, that Principals can also come across as enthusiasts or zealots – as well as in other shapes and sizes, of course. This is developed briefly later in this article.

**Dealing with the fanatic**

We come now to the focal question: what do we do when confronted by the uncom-

promising zealot, especially when we can see at least some merit in their proposal?

By nature and training, educators like to change damaging behaviour that threatens the normal operation of a school, and because we are used to encouraging “meritorious proposals” we often give fanatics more support than they really deserve.

I am reminded of a Principal who was approached by a parent with a proposal to beautify the front garden at the school. Delighted to have such a keen worker – and the proposer was certainly that – the Principal promised to discuss the idea with Head Office to ensure that there were no problems with the suggested plan. “I was no gardener myself and couldn’t tell a rose from a rhododendron, so I really thought that I was on a winner” he said. Sadly – but not uncommonly – Head Office was slow to respond to the Principal’s letter and after three weeks the proposer, annoyed at the delay, asked whether she could at least start on the project before the planting season ended. The Principal

saw the wisdom of that request and gave her the nod at lunchtime on Friday, before heading off to a meeting. Returning to the school early on Monday morning he was amazed at the progress made on the weekend – until he was approached by the Deputy. “Did you know that the roses that were ripped out on the weekend were planted to mark the opening of this school forty years ago?” Oops! Next came the bursar who asked who was going to pay the account for the expensive plants that had been purchased and installed. Oops! Finally a parent, dropping off his daughter that morning, popped into the Principal’s office to ask whether he realised that the new hedge that had been planted along the front of the garden bed was a prohibited plant for schools because of the thorns that would be apparent when the costly border grew. Oops!

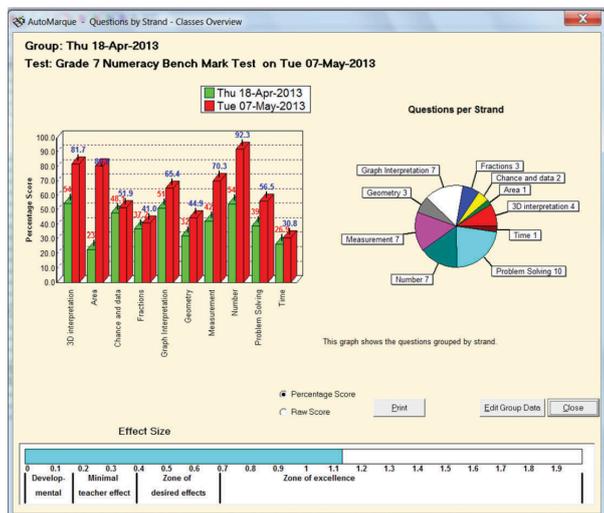
What had seemed like a good idea turned out to an expensive disaster – because the Principal failed to control a fanatic. The seemingly sensible point about following the seasons need not



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have led to a panicked permission; it could have been used as an excuse to clear the matter with one's superiors.

A simple policy might be: if you are not really sure of your ground, admit this and seek the relevant advice. The long term results will be much better – and with a bit of luck, you might even help your over-enthusiastic parent see that schools operate as part of a system.

**Personal enthusiasm**

As mentioned earlier, Principals themselves can also become enthusiasts or fanatics, and the impact on colleagues, school and system might be serious, so some self-examination might be in order. Having worked with a small number of fanatical leaders, I would not describe the situation as desirable. Ideally, an educational system will keep an eye on this and offer relevant professional development. It is certainly not up to the staff to pull their Principal into line.

On the other hand, if a Principal is perceived as an enthusiast, the author-

ities will usually welcome this because they will see the benefits that accrue from such a quality. Sadly, this might mean that the enthusiastic leader becomes overburdened by system-level demands, but that is the subject of a later article. More importantly, the staff, the parents and the students will recognise that the school is led by someone who can enrich them in their own lives. I am not suggesting that unenthusiastic people cannot play a major leadership role, whether in commerce or education or most other fields. Instead, I suggest some leaders might inspire their followers by their relevant talent, but a balanced enthusiast goes further by adding an extra dimension to the repertoire displayed by others.

I have watched talented pianists who lacked overt enthusiasm, and I have watched Victor Borge who added a new dimension to music by his bubbly antics. I know whose music I would prefer to listen to, especially in a concert situation.

It must be admitted that enthusiasm can also be a strain on relationships, es-

pecially if the energy is uncontrolled. An example would be a leader who introduces several different projects simultaneously. A danger here is lack of follow-up by the leader, and poor morale quickly arises from unfinished tasks.

In concluding, might I say that even enthusiasts need a break, and the risk of overload must be considered regularly? If we can approach our work, keenly facing all the people who cross our paths regularly, our enthusiasm will be sensed and more often than not replicated. This will enhance the spirit of our schools and the benefits will be vast. As the Roman poet, Horace, advised us: *carpe diem*. Seize the day – and the weeks will look after themselves.

For those who would really like to add some enthusiasm to their way of acting, might I suggest the web is full of great articles – google “becoming enthusiastic” – but for those who don't yet have the necessary level of enthusiasm to get onto that process, might I suggest ten points that might be a good starting point?

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