



Torching Tired Traditions



By Lyn Fiscus

Every school has traditions. Sometimes they are time-honored customs that have been carefully cultivated as important elements of the school year, and sometimes they spring up because, as everyone knows, if you do something two years in a row it must be a tradition! Often traditions are associated with big events on the school calendar like Homecoming, prom, and graduation. But sometimes a well-loved activity that a group sponsors each year becomes a tradition that students look forward to just as much as the bigger events—the food drive competition, a Valentine flower delivery, a talent show. Busy student councils often find themselves with a calendar that just keeps growing every year, as student leaders come up with new activities to add. Somehow, nothing ever seems to be subtracted because it's a "tradition."

If you find yourself in this position, perhaps it's time to evaluate the traditions your council is responsible for and decide if they are activities worth keeping. Consider the following points as you evaluate what is worthy of keeping and what can be eliminated or adjusted.

■ **Conduct a month-by-month review** of all the activities your group sponsors. Are they concentrated around a particular event or season? Perhaps your group goes all out for holiday activities or plans several events around graduation. Like a juggler with too many balls in the air, the more activities you have going on at once the higher your stress level is bound to be. Is there a way some of these activities can be moved to slower times of the year? For example, a food drive is traditional at Thanksgiving, but food banks also need food at other times of the year. How about holding a "stock up for summer" food drive in the spring? Look for lulls in the calendar and see if any events can be shifted to the slower times.

■ **Consider the vitality of the tradition.** Look at the number of people who participate in the activity and their level of interest for doing so. If participation is lackluster, perhaps the tradition has run its course. Would anyone miss


it if it stopped happening? Also consider how excited the members of your group are to work on making the activity happen. If they aren't eager to work on it, that could be a sign that the student body won't be eager to participate in it either.

■ **Identify the purpose of the tradition.** What function does the tradition serve? Is it designed to build class unity? To showcase school spirit? To raise money? To engage an uninvolved portion of the student body? Getting at the main reason for having the activity can help identify ways to improve or eliminate it. For example, if having each class create a banner for Homecoming to display at the game is designed to allow artistic students to participate in Homecoming activities, take a look at who actually works on the banners. Is it the same people who do everything else? Is it one more burden for the class officers to carry at a time when they are already overloaded? If so, what can be done to involve the people the activity is intended to involve? Perhaps the art club could take over this aspect of Homecoming. By considering what the purpose of the tradition is, groups can decide whether it's time to either let this tradition go or plan a new one that serves the same purpose.

■ **Consider how the activity supports the goals of your group.** Ask yourselves "why do we do this?" and "why is it important?" If the activity no longer relates to one of your group's goals, why continue to sponsor it? If it does still have relevance, consider what elements of the event are worth keeping and plan ways to revitalize the activity.

■ **Evaluate whether the tradition supports school goals.** Meet with the administration to talk about whether the traditions are helping or hindering the overall school goals. Are the activities helping to promote a positive school climate? Helping to engage students and develop a connection to the school? Supporting the academic mission? If a tradition isn't adding value to the school's mission, it should be discontinued.

■ **Consider how long-standing the tradition is.** If a par-



ticular tradition dates back to the founding of the school, maybe it's worth keeping just for that reason. If so, do a bit of research in old yearbooks and newspaper archives and publicize the rich history of the tradition. Develop school pride in the long-standing nature of the activity and help students and others see that they are part of something bigger than their particular year.

Making a Change

Some activities can be modified or eliminated and no one will mind much. A few comments like, "it didn't used to be like this, did it?" will be made, but school life will go on pretty much the same. There are other events that are so ingrained in the life of the school or community that changing them can cause many repercussions—canceling a Homecoming parade, eliminating the Sadie Hawkins dance, or changing the way elections are held, for example.

If your group decides to change an activity it has sponsored that is considered an ingrained tradition, it's best to proceed

carefully. Develop a plan for making the change and be sure to involve others—students, teachers, principals, parents—in the process. Remember the adage that people support what they help to create. The more people there are who can feel that they have a hand in developing something, the more people will support it.

Plan also to develop a public relations plan for publicizing the change; let people know the rationale for the change, what the new way entails, how the new method of doing things will be better. Use social media, morning announcements, the school newspaper, the principal's newsletter, e-mails, even press releases to the local paper if it's something that involves the community. Get the word out so people will understand the change and more people will be likely to support it.

Then just be prepared to weather the storm. Not everyone will like the change and some will complain. But keep in mind that in a year or two, the new way will become the tradition, and people won't want to change it either!

