

By BRIAN ACKLEY
WIN Columnist

Last week's furor over a cancelled Halloween parade at a Williamsville elementary school happily turned out to be as much trick as it will be treat.

For those who missed it, a popular holiday tradition – an afternoon outdoor parade with hundreds of costumed children, attended by some costumed parents as well – went the way of biblical monuments in state courthouses when school officials decided to end the decades-long tradition. After some parents protested the cancellation, a compromise was reached, substituting a day-long celebration of the season instead. Costumes, with limits, will be allowed.

But, whoa, if you're thinking of writing this off to the easy allure of political correctness. True, the compromise calling it a "fall festival" instead of a Halloween celebration might lurch a little into PC territory, but the issue is much, much larger than the traditional suburban worries of a few strategically tossed eggs or wayward rolls of toilet paper.

In a week where law officials released sickening and chilling video of the two teens responsible for the Columbine massacre, local school officials were simply pulling back the curtain on a host of security issues that have become as troubling and central to any school district as test scores and pep rallies. The three most important R's in modern school day life have become reading, writing and refuge. This was a lot bigger than the comparatively niggling debate over whether lowering a passing grade to 55 is a good idea or not.

Society has, in a broad-brush kind of way, made schools too often responsible for not only math, but manners and morality as well, especially at the elementary level. Security badges, locked doors and video cameras have become as standard issue in many schools as lunch trays, textbooks and gym lockers. Once upon the day, in-service staff training dealt with the trifling matters of teaching techniques and school bus rules. Chaperoning the Friday night dance meant keeping kids out of the Buick's back seat, not the back seats of police cruisers.

Most frightful of all is debunking the public notion that most of these school issues and decisions are aimed at keeping in check some loner with a dark and deranged fascination of kids. Often, school safety involves broken families in custody disputes and arguments that spill over from the den to the desk. Schools aren't courts, but they are often asked to perform like one.

Of course, this all comes with the backdrop of Halloween's insipid money-grabbing ascent of the last decade or so. When did front lawns start looking like the staging area of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, anyway? Forever, a goofy jack-o-lantern and Newberry's-issued plastic mask were the requisite items for a solid holiday. The haul, as we used to call it, was only successful if it contained more chocolate than fruit. Today, it's as if the people from Hallmark and Hershey's conspired around the time of the Reagan administration to elevate the once fun but relatively low-key observation to a commercial cornucopia of costumes, crepe paper and crunch bars.

You want a pressure-packed school holiday? Try Valentine's Day. Woe be to the student whose construction-paper mailbox wasn't overstuffed with goofy greetings and silly sentiments.

To be sure, school security has become a daunting and scary issue. Let's face it. Second graders are more in touch with Cinderella than sensibilities. On Halloween, that's the way it should be. Kudos to school officials and parents alike who found a way to invent a trick that saved the treat.

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)