

One day, as the winter approached, his teacher did come to me during the lunch break. She was beside herself. Her frustration showed in her face, and she burst out, "I can't figure it out. For many days now some of the kids in my class are complaining that their recess snacks are missing when recess begins. I've checked with their parents thinking at first the kids forgot to bring them to school. It's clear to me that someone is taking the snacks sometime in the morning, but I haven't been able to find out when or who's doing it. What should I do?"

My suggestions to her did not bring speedy results. Recess snacks kept disappearing. Two weeks later, I had come out of my office as recess began. I peeked into each classroom and happened to walk past the boys' bathroom door just as Charlie and his buddies were coming out. That the sweater he wore was much too big for him caught my eye first. It had several holes in it, and I saw it bulged with objects under it. I also noticed cookie crumbs around his mouth and that of his two buddies.

As principal you develop a nose for trouble. Maybe it's a second sense for survival. The things under his sweater that made the bulges begged me to investigate. "Nice to see you guys," I began. "What's under your sweater, Charlie?"

With his eyes cast to the floor he mumbled, "Nothin."

"Let me have a quick look at what's under there before you go outside," I continued. Charlie stood silent and frozen to the spot for a few seconds before he slowly pulled the arm clutching the bottom part of his sweater away and lifted the grey sweater up. Out fell several cookies, a container of chocolate milk and various other items that spoke loudly of recess snacks. But the items that fell to the floor did not hold my attention for long. It was the sight of the shape of Charlie's stomach that brought a silent, "Oh, no!" to my consciousness.

My inner voice screamed, "Charlie's a malnourished, starving child," as he let the sweater drop. He didn't move or lift his eyes. His little frame and what he wore burned a deep path into my brain. I noticed the boots he wore. They were many sizes too big and not a matching pair. It took several more moments to collect my thoughts. "Why don't we pick all that stuff up, boys and go to my office?" I muttered.

It didn't take long to solve the disappearing recess snacks riddle in my office. "You guys have been taking cookies and things from other kids for quite a few days, haven't you?" I asked once we were all seated. All three nodded slowly. None of them looked at me. "Can you tell me why you did that?" I continued. The three heads remained bowed. Not one of them broke the long silence. My thoughts returned to the sight of Charlie's stomach.

“Did any of you have breakfast this morning?” I asked convinced of the answer before I asked it.

One of the boys nodded, but Charlie and his other friend slowly shook their head. When I asked about what they had brought for lunch Charlie raised his head for one split moment and mumbled, “Nothin.”

I called their teacher and asked her if she had noticed what the boys usually ate for lunch. She mentioned that some days they didn’t eat telling her they had eaten their lunch at recess. From time to time during the weeks we had been in session I had dropped in to all classrooms during lunch time. I had made small talk and laughed with the children for a few minutes on those visits. What I remembered now, sitting in judgment over the three little guys, was that I had seen on most of those rounds that quite a few children didn’t eat nearly all the food they had brought. I had seen in waste baskets half sandwiches still in their plastic wrappers, vegetables in plastic bags, apples, bananas and oranges not bitten into. The realization that while this was happening we had children in our school who didn’t have enough to eat on many days hit me like a lightning bolt. In my mind’s eye I saw Charlie’s sad face. How often, I wondered, had he come to school hungry?

The bell signaling the end of recess sounded. “I want you three to go to your class now,” I said rising from my chair, “and I’ll see you at lunch time.” Missing recess snacks had not occupied me for some time. The overwhelming question in my mind was, “What can we do for our Charlies?” To deal with the immediate problem of at least two of our kids having no lunch, I decided to drive to the grocery store and buy sandwiches and fruit. On my way out of the store I walked past a shop window in which I saw clothing, boots and shoes, reminding me of Charlie’s boots. I could not recall ever seeing him with shoes that fit.

A few minutes before lunch I called the boys to my office again and gave them the food I had bought. With, “When you’ve finished eating I want you, Charlie to come back here again,” I dismissed them to go back to their classroom. I had decided before driving to the store to meet with the staff after school that day. One thing we could do immediately in each classroom, I knew, was to place sharing baskets where students could place food they would not eat, and that could be available to anyone still hungry. From the first day on these baskets were seldom empty at the end of the day, and not once did we have to deal with missing recess snacks again from that day on.

After about twenty minutes into the lunch hour, I heard the shuffle of Charlie’s feet in the hallway coming toward the office. He came to the door without looking up and stood still inside the doorway. “Have a seat, Charlie,” I said. He lumbered to one of the three empty chairs

slowly, but he didn't sit down. I placed a pair of socks and boots in front of him. "Can you put those on, Charlie?" I said.

He looked at the socks for a moment and then studied the boots for a long time. Then he looked at me. It was the first time I saw Charlie smile; and I heard him say pointing to the boots, "And two of them."