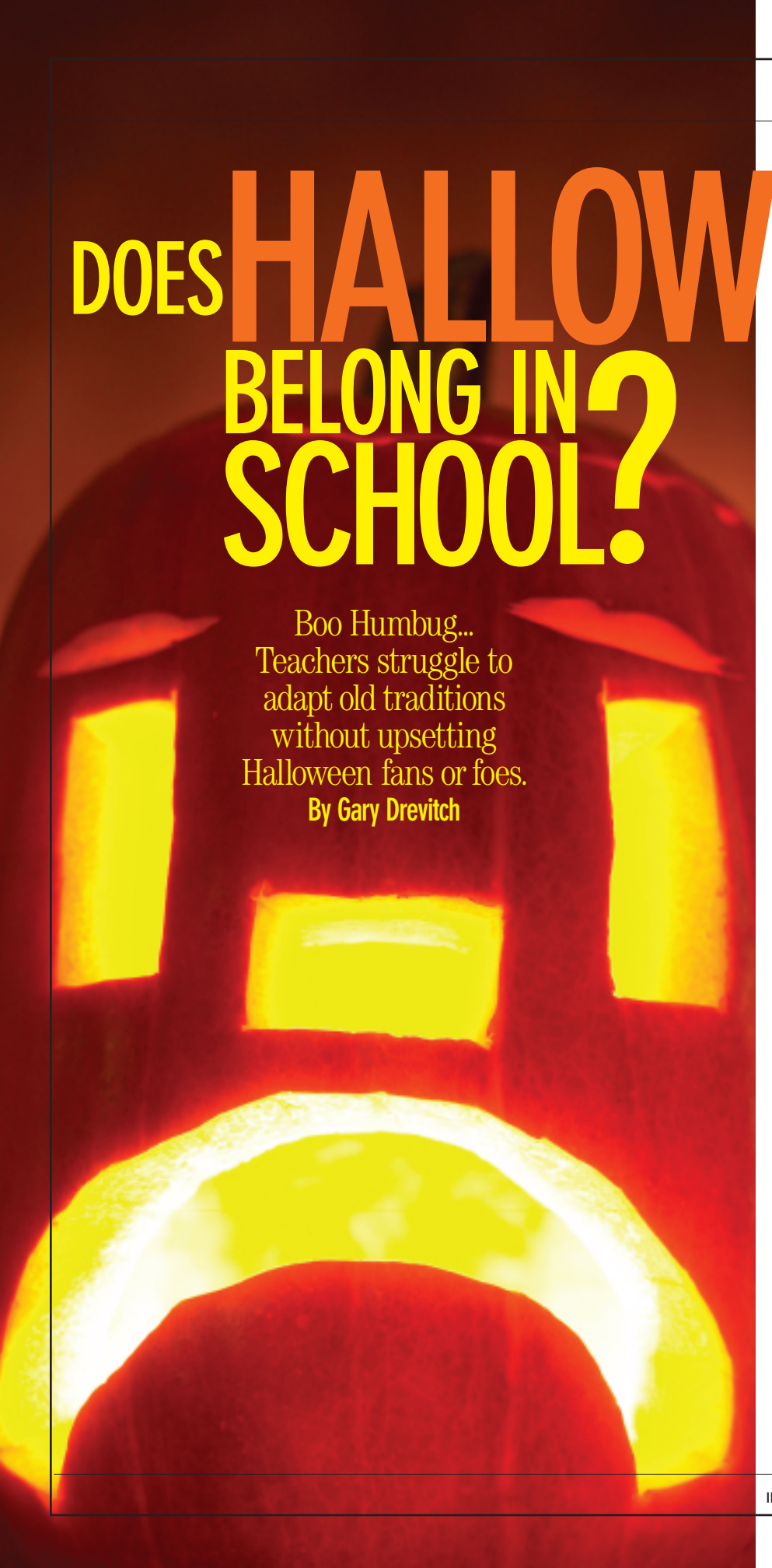
DOES HALLOWEEN BELONG IN SCHOOL?



Boo Humbug... Teachers struggle to adapt old traditions without upsetting Halloween fans or foes.

By Gary Drevitch

For many teachers, trying to organize a Halloween celebration has become more of a trick than a treat. Some religious groups protest the observance of what they consider a pagan celebration and administrators fret about maintaining security during events that are, by definition, wild. Even educators complain that class time devoted to candy corn parties would be better spent on math and science.

The number of parents coming out against the holiday is also on the rise, says Charles Haynes, senior scholar at the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center in Arlington, Virginia, and an expert on religious conflicts in schools. Evangelical Christians, Muslims, and others oppose the celebration of Halloween because of what they see as its pagan roots, or at least its implicit endorsement of the occult. (The holiday derives many of its traditions from an ancient Celtic, or Druid, harvest festival.)

Some critics want to know why a school can have witches in October, but can't have Jesus in December. They often label school Halloween events anti-Christian or unconstitutional. The legal argument is incorrect, Haynes says, because schools are allowed to teach about religious subjects. "It's not that you can't do it under the First Amendment," he says. "The question is, should you?"

No single approach to Halloween will succeed everywhere, as opinions on the holiday vary widely from one community to the next. "This is an issue each school needs to deal with based on its own local issues and circumstances," says Vince Ferrandino, executive director of the

National Association of Elementary School Principals in Alexandria, Virginia.

The worst thing a school can do is unilaterally decide in mid-October to drop the holiday without consulting the community. "Avoid any element of surprise," Ferrandino says. "If a decision is made not to participate where a school has been participating, the community needs a clear explanation why."

In fact, schools ought to look beyond Halloween and establish a comprehensive policy on all classroom holiday observance, so that the issue doesn't return throughout the year. If your school doesn't have a policy, consider initiating the development of one. Involve parents, elected officials, and religious groups in the discussion.

What's A Teacher to Do?

For a teacher in a school without a formal holiday policy, the choice on Halloween typically boils down to either celebrating the holiday (while allowing families to opt out), or banning it altogether. Each is problematic.

An opt-out policy can be difficult because teachers often spend class time preparing for Halloween, decorating and incorporating holiday content into lesson plans. "When it's everywhere, it's impossible to just opt out," says Haynes, who suggests that Halloween parties be held after school.

Teachers who respond to protests by banning Halloween events will not find it an easy way out either. They are likely to meet a fierce backlash from parents who don't want their kids to be denied the celebrations they themselves grew up with. Schools from New York City to Puyallup, Washington, faced protests from angry pro-Halloween parents last year.

"Heroween," Anyone?

Many teachers take a middle-of-the-road approach to the holiday: They hold alternative celebrations that avoid Halloween but include costumes and candy. Such celebrations typically focus on the language arts curriculum. For events like "Heroween," "Hallow-read," and "Character Day," students come to school dressed as favorite fictional characters or historical figures—from Captain Hook to Rosa Parks. Other schools replace Halloween parties with a fall seasonal celebration emphasizing nature and the environment.

No matter what form they take, schools holding events during the Halloween season are increasingly making concessions to security concerns. Many no longer allow parents to attend parties in costume, fearing the presence of unidentifiable adults. Others ban all masks, so children can always be tracked. Parades have been eliminated, as teachers avoid events that can't be easily controlled. Many teachers send home guidelines about what costumes will not be allowed, typically barring cross-dressing, all manner of weapons, costumes that spout fake blood, outfits that could be considered racist, inflatable "fat suits," and get-ups that are too revealing.

Test your Halloween smarts

■ **WHO STARTED IT?** The Celts, 2,000 years ago. What began as a celebration of the end of the year (and a day when spirits of the dead were believed to walk the earth), later became part of a three-day Christian holiday called Hallowmas, a combination of Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day.

■ **WHAT'S A HALLOWEEN TURNIP?** In the 1900's, Irish immigrants brought Halloween to America, plus jack-o-lanterns, originally made with turnips instead of pumpkins!

■ **WHAT'S IN YOUR PILLOWCASE?** Last year, Americans spent more than $2 billion on Halloween candy. That's a lot of candy corn!

■ **WHAT ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE?** In 2004, more than 2 million people dressed up as Spider-man, making it the most popular costume of the year. Also in the top 20: clowns, witches, princesses, firefighters, SpongeBob, and Harry Potter.

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Learning: What a Treat!

No matter how their school celebrates the holiday, many teachers say there's no reason to shy away from the Halloween debate in the classroom. "Anytime you have a controversy, you have a teachable moment," says Jeff Passe, a former fourth-grade teacher who is now president of the National Council for the Social Studies.

Bill Amburn, a seventh-grade social-studies teacher at Central Middle School in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, says teachers need to talk about Halloween "because so many kids really don't have any idea where it came from. They think it's just a night to go wild."

Amburn shares articles on Halloween with his students and urges them to think critically about what place the holiday should have in society. For example, the modern practice of trick or treat evolved in the 1920s and 1930s, in part because young people were committing serious acts of vandalism on October 31. Groups like the Boy Scouts stepped in and encouraged adults to offer treats to costumed kids to ward off their "tricks." This information can lead to a discussion of law, civics, and responsibility.

Passe recommends approaching the holiday from a historical perspective and discussing its evolution. "It's not passed down from the Bible, after all," he says. There's also an economic angle: How does a holiday become a major economic event through the marketing of costumes, candy, and parties, and does this create pressure to celebrate it? Finally, there's the sociological question: Why do people celebrate holidays?

A teacher could lead any number of lively discussions on the nature of Halloween, but an in-class party is another issue. Even if a party is scheduled for the end of the day, Passe says, every teacher knows that the attendant excitement "makes it a tough day to teach anything." □

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