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US: Area school officials disagree over need for conflict resolvers

Karin Anderson & Matthew Haag, Dallas News, 5 June 2008

Most parents know where to drop their kids off at school and where to pick them up. But many adults are left at the curb when trying to navigate their school systems without a field guide.

Some have taken a stab at negotiating with school staff when problems arise. Others have brought their complaints straight to their school boards, sometimes coming away blistering mad.

"Once you get into the grievance process, the results are win-lose or lose-lose," said Greg Gibson, superintendent of the Crowley Independent School District.

He thinks he's found a way to prevent much of the hand-wringing: hiring a school ombudsman.

Crowley is part of an emerging group of school districts around the country spending a chunk of their limited budgets on conflict resolution specialists.

Washington, D.C., schools hired an ombudsman last year after the mayor took control of the troubled school system. The state of Washington developed a state ombudsman office in 2006 at the behest of the Legislature.

Counting the number of school ombudsmen in Texas is difficult. But Beverly Reeves, an Austin school ombudsman, says there are about a half-dozen. Arlington schools have one, and Fort Bend schools started a similar program at the recommendation of the state comptroller's office. Other districts have another

sort of ombudsman, who handles only internal employee disputes or serves as a liaison to certain ethnic groups.

Tim Carroll, a spokesman for Allen schools, said it's always been part of his unofficial job title to deal with disgruntled parents.

"A lot of times, people want something, but they're not going to get it," he said. "If they don't get it, we must be wrong. We can ombuds that to death, but eventually somebody's not going to get what he wants."

Read more at <http://snipr.com/2tbb8>

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UK: Schools of thought: teach children philosophy, experts urge

Anthea Lipsett The Guardian, July 2, 2008

Children of all ages should study philosophy in school to develop their critical thinking skills, education experts said today. Academics suggest that, rather than start off with Socrates, teachers use common classroom disputes to help children learn about abstract philosophical principles such as fairness, morality and punishment. They give the example of apportioning blame for spilling paint

The book *Philosophy in Schools*, edited by Dr Michael Hand of the Institute of Education and Dr Carrie Winstanley of Roehampton University, puts forward several arguments for including philosophy in the school curriculum.

"Critical thinkers are people who reason well, and who judge and act on the basis of their reasoning," Hand says. "To become critical thinkers, children must learn what constitutes good reasoning and why it's important - and these are philosophical matters. Exposure to philosophy should be part of the basic educational entitlement of all children."

In philosophy, the quality of arguments and the meanings of words are under constant scrutiny.

Winstanley said teachers could use popular books to initiate philosophical discussions. For example, *Where the Wild Things Are* could lead into debates on the existence of monsters, and why the main character's mother sends him to his room without supper.

Winstanley said: "Better than any other subject, philosophy teaches children how to assess reasons, defend positions, define terms, evaluate sources of information and judge the value of arguments and evidence."

Read more at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2288603,00.html>

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UK: Running the show

Victoria Neumark, The Guardian, July 1, 2008

Among the paintings and plants in the hall and corridors at Raynham school, Edmonton, north London, posters boldly urge, "Attention all children! Are you helpful, cooperative and keen to work in teams? Apply for the Raynham Runners!"

The school's "runners", a taskforce of a seventh of the 720 pupils, are not dissimilar to old-fashioned monitors with added professionalism. Wearing badges and smiles, they tend to the day-to-day care of the

school, from planting and watering plants to recycling to running messages. But underlying the simplicity of each task is a recruitment process that matches key strands of the government's Every Child Matters programme.

The programme, which began in 2004, requires that schools support every child to be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; and achieve economic wellbeing. This last item on the list has sometimes been tricky for schools to include.

"We couldn't think how a primary school could help with economic wellbeing," says Marva Rollins, head-teacher at Raynham. "Then, in October 2005, our previous deputy head thought of this."

"It is a formal process," says Sharon Gepp, the school's pastoral officer, who administers the scheme. Children fill in a form, choosing three from a list of jobs like pencil-sharpening or reading to younger children. Applicants undergo a formal interview with two members of staff, where they answer set questions. They receive a letter of appointment and a badge. Their payment is certificates of appreciation. If they leave, they must write a proper letter of resignation. Sample: "Every day I come into work I get a headache from the little ones, so I'm sorry, but I have to resign because of my health."

Read more at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2288272,00.html>

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USA: Zero Tolerance: The School Woodshed

Rhonda B. Armistead, Education Week, 11 June 2008

A 1st grader is disciplined for "sexual harassment" after smacking a classmate's bottom on the playground and the police are called in; a high school student is expelled after a butter knife brought to school accidentally falls out of her locker; a 17-year-old is arrested and expelled for shooting a paper clip with a rubber band.

Few policies in education have proven to be as universally ineffective - even counterproductive - as "zero tolerance." Brought to prominence in 1994 when Congress enacted the Gun-Free Schools Act to address weapons-based school violence and drug problems, zero-tolerance edicts have become the virtual woodshed of school discipline: They are solely punitive, and lack any positive connection to schools' primary purpose - learning and development.

A zero-tolerance program's goal is to act as a deterrent and provide swift intervention for misconduct, sending a strong, "one strike and you're out" message to students. It prescribes non-negotiable punishment (typically, suspension or expulsion) for a specified behavior, regardless of the extent or context of the infraction. Possession of a butter knife and possession of a switchblade, for instance, automatically receive the same punishment, even though common sense indicates a different intention and degree of risk in the two infractions.

Discipline and punishment are not synonymous, and we need to separate the two.

Read more at <http://snipr.com/2tbdc>

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USA: Could Standard Grading Practices Be Counterproductive?

Paul Barnwell, Education Week, 30 June 2008

Imagine the following scenario: Valerie gets her report card back on a day when palpable excitement and fear surge through the school as students bustle back to homeroom in the afternoon. She is relieved - -

straight A's, as usual - and goes on her way. Valerie is a responsible student - some might label her a "teacher pleaser." She completes most of her homework, despite struggling a bit on exams.

In another classroom, Jonathan gets his report card from his homeroom teacher, and his hands tremble as he unfolds the paper. A few C's, a few D's, and one F - and this despite the fact that he scored high on his tests in all subjects. Jonathan usually did not turn in homework, and was lazy at times in class. Yet he demonstrated mastery of the content.

With these scenes in mind, please consider the following: What do grades mean? More important, what should they mean? Should they be emphasized in our schools as much as they are?

Grades can mean many things, of course. To receive an A as Valerie did might mean that a student worked diligently, completing all assignments and doing just well enough on tests and other projects. It also could mean that a student knew most of the material going into the course and had no trouble at all, receiving high marks but barely learning anything. It might mean grade inflation. It might be a reflection of a few graded assignments, or it could reflect dozens of assigned grades, depending on the teacher's assessment methods. Countless other variables are possible when grades are tallied.

It is hardly surprising, then, that parents, teachers, and students often discuss or dispute grades, with the constant threat of panic or conflict if a grade drastically dips. What is shocking is how rare the following question is asked: Does this grade reflect whether or not the student has actually learned anything?

Read more at http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/06/30/43barnwell-com_web.h27.html?tmp=243500620

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Technology brings 'new P.E.' to schools

USA: Dennis Carter, eSchool News, 10 June 2008

Physical education teachers are trading in their traditional equipment for heart-rate monitors and video games that encourage running, jumping, and stretching. Taken together, these two trends are transforming P.E. classes across the country and are spurring school officials to vie for millions in grants.

More than 10,000 schools across the country reportedly use heart-rate monitors - wristwatches that calculate a student's heartbeat and heart rate target zone - that make it easier for teachers to track student performance. And a growing number of schools are embracing a new phenomenon known as "exergaming," encouraging students to exercise using video games such as Nintendo's new Wii Fit and Dance Dance Revolution (DDR), in which players mimic dance moves on the screen, requiring constant movement.

Advocates of this trend say integrating gaming into gym classes - replacing the monotony of jumping rope or running laps - could increase participation among all students, rather than the sliver of "jocks" in every class. This could help stem the alarming increase in childhood obesity in the United States, experts say, where 16 percent of people ages six to 19 are overweight or obese. That number has more than tripled since 1980, according to health watchdog groups.

"It's motivating for students, it's intriguing to them, it really captures people's attention, and it gives you a vehicle for talking about healthy lifestyles and consistent physical activity patterns," said Fran Cleland, president of the National Association for Sports and Physical Education (NASPE), one of the country's most prominent physical education organizations. "It allows you to do that in a more mechanized way."

Read more at <http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/top-news/?i=54082>

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USA: Buzz Lightyear Launches Students Into Space

Vicky Kriz, Teacher Magazine 10 June 2008

Fans of the popular Disney movie "Toy Story" know about toy space cadet Buzz Lightyear's dream to take a "real" mission into space. For those who don't know, Buzz is an animated character who, although only a toy, aspired to enter space or, as he describes it, with finger in the air, "to Infinity and Beyond."

As part of NASA's Toys in Space program and Disney's Space Ranger Education Series, Buzz recently got his chance, traveling with the seven-member crew of Space Shuttle Discovery on Mission STS-124 to the International Space Station. Although the shuttle will soon return to Earth, Buzz will spend the remainder of the summer on the ISS where he - or presumably a scientist channeling his avatar - will experiment with flying in zero gravity.

NASA and Disney's Youth Education Series provide an interactive Web feature documenting Buzz's adventure, including a daily blog and audio commentary from Buzz discussing aspects of the mission and life in space.

The site's five student "missions" include math and science games for K-5th graders, where, for example, you can take them on a mission to "Load the Shuttle." Here, K-2nd graders can select a combination of weights to equal the shuttle's contents and 3rd-5th graders can experiment with metric conversions. Other missions explore concepts of zero gravity and outline the history and influence of space technology on everyday life.

The site will be up until December 2008.

Read more at <http://snipr.com/2tbody>

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UK: More parents are keen to send children to private school

Nicola Woolcock, Times Online, 5 June 2008

Increasing numbers of parents would send their children to independent school if they could afford it, according to new research.

The Mori poll found the greatest shift in attitude among Labour voters, of whom more than half (54 per cent) would pay for private education if they had sufficient money. This has risen from just two-fifths four years ago.

Fear of knife crime, the perception of bad behaviour in state schools and relentless Government meddling with education could be influencing parents, the independent sector said.

The Independent Schools Council, which commissioned the survey, said its schools offered "stability in an environment where educational changes seem to be announced every week".

Pru Jones, its head of research, said: "There seems to be a sense of coming to a haven of moral values. We don't want to say in any way that in independent schools there are no challenges in pupil behaviour.

"But it does seem there is almost a panic that is engendered in the nation's psyche, about what is happening in schools and pupil behaviour, that may be impacting on this [the figures]." Ms Jones added that there was "confusion and fear" among parents about the introduction of the new diploma for 14 to 19-year-olds.

After questioning 602 parents, the report authors found 57 per cent would pay for their child's school education if they could afford it. This is the highest rate since the research began in 1997, and up from 48 per cent since the last survey in 2004, perhaps signifying a cultural shift in beliefs about paying for education.

The perception that independent schools offer better standards of education than state schools was the main reason, as in previous years, and was given by two-thirds of parents who would educate their children privately.

However better discipline appears to be of rising concern, becoming the second most popular explanation for the first time this year. It was given as a reason by 30 per cent, compared with only 14 per cent in 2004. 'Better moral standards' was also at its highest level as an answer, at 9 per cent.

Read more at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article4069461.ece>

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UK: Private school demand is highest for five years despite big fee rises

Alexandra Frean, Times Online, 30 April 2008

Independent schools have had the biggest increase in pupil numbers in five years as parents dig deep to avoid the state system.

Although successive above-inflation fee increases have driven the average cost of private education to more than £11,000 a year, the number of children enrolled in schools belonging to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) has risen to a record 511,677. This is despite a fall in the number of English children of school age and in the number of overseas pupils, and fears that the credit crunch could lead to recession.

The increase has been driven by a big expansion of provision in the nursery sector, as growing numbers of preparatory schools have decided to accept three-year-olds. Longer working hours, commuting and the rising costs of formal childcare have persuaded more parents to turn to independent schools for a preschool education.

Deborah Odysseas-Bailey, chairwoman of the Independent Schools Association and headmistress of Babbington House school in Kent, which has a nursery, said parents were now putting children's names down for school at birth, if not before. "Parents are buying into independent education at a much earlier age. Once they are in, they wish to remain," she said.

Figures also show a strong rise in the number of sixth formers in the independent sector. Barnard Trafford, chairman of the HMC group of elite independent schools and headmaster of Wolverhampton Grammar, said this was because such schools offered a broader education and wider range of subjects, including modern languages, classics and the sciences at A level.

The increase in demand for a private education comes against a 6.2 per cent increase in school fees, according to the ISC annual census. At the top end of the scale, there are now 14 boarding schools and one day school charging more than £27,000 a year.

Read more at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article3842831.ece>

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UK: Cuts leave thousands of schools facing toughest squeeze in a decade

Sam Coates, The Times, 5 June 2008

A third of schools have had their budgets cut, with the worst-performing schools suffering most, it has been claimed.

Hundreds of teachers and staff are facing redundancy as the Government forces savings upon 7,700 schools in England.

The figures were uncovered by the Liberal Democrats on the eve of a speech today by Nick Clegg on education. Mr. Clegg will say: "For many schools, Blair's 'Education, Education, Education', is about to become Brown's 'Cuts, Cuts, Cuts'.

"It seems absolutely crazy to be cutting school budgets and staffing. This can only make it more difficult for our education system to meet the challenge of raising standards."

A higher than expected pay settlement for teachers, combined with rising inflation, means that many thousands of schools are facing the toughest squeeze for a decade.

The Government announced in November that the increased running costs in schools would amount to 3.1 per cent over the next year, but a freedom of information request by the Liberal Democrats to local authorities found that more than a third of schools would receive less.

The party obtained data covering 10,457 schools - more than half of the schools in the country and more than a third of England's local authorities. On these figures, a projected 7,700 schools across England are in effect receiving a cut in their budgets as funding per pupil fails to rise in line with inflation.

Read more at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article4069398.ece>

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USA: Reading First Program Doesn't Help Pupils 'Get it' Are other factors skewing results?

Kathleen Kennedy Manzo , Education Week, 7 May 2008

The \$1 billion-a-year Reading First program has had no measurable effect on students' reading comprehension, on average, although participating schools are spending significantly more time teaching the basic skills that researchers say children need to become proficient readers, a major federal report finds.

The long-awaited interim report from the Reading First Impact Study , released last week by the Institute of Education Sciences, says that students in schools receiving grants from the federal program have not fared any better than their counterparts in comparison schools in gaining meaning from print.

That central finding in the first national study of Reading First's effect on student reading achievement, however, does not necessarily signal that the program, or the evidence-based instructional model it is based on, isn't working, federal officials said.

"There are at least four possibilities for the results. One is that scientifically based reading instruction ... doesn't work," said Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, the director of the institute, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education. "Another possibility is that the instruction works, but it was not sufficient enough to have an impact on reading comprehension" even if it improved decoding skills, reading fluency, and vocabulary, he said.

Read more at http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/05/07/36read_ep.h27.html

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USA: Scholastic Report: Kids Still Read for Fun - Teens, Less So

John A. Sellers, Publishers Weekly, 11 June 2008

A new report released by Scholastic corroborates the findings of the company's 2006 report on children's reading habits, finding that pleasure reading in children begins to decline at age eight and continues to do so into the teen years. The study found that a majority of children (68%) think it is "extremely" or "very" important to read for pleasure, and "like" or "love" doing so.

However, that number decreases with age: 82% percent of children ages five to eight "like" or "love" reading, compared to 55% for children ages 15 to 17. It also found that although children can readily envision a future in which reading and technology are increasingly intertwined, nearly two thirds prefer to read physical books, rather than on a computer screen or digital device. Additionally, a large majority of children recognize the importance of reading for their future goals, with 90% of respondents agreeing that they "need to be a strong reader to get into a good college."

The 2008 Kids and Family Reading Report, conducted by TSC, a division of consumer trends research company Yankelovich, is based on interviews with 1,002 respondents (501 children ages five to 17 and a parent or guardian for each). It explored kids' attitudes toward reading, as well as the roles that technology, parental input and the Harry Potter books play in their reading habits.

Nearly one in four children was found to be a "high frequency" pleasure reader (reading daily), with an additional 53% qualifying as "moderate frequency" readers, reading for pleasure between one and six times per week. When children were asked why they do not engage in more pleasure reading, the top answer selected was "I would rather do other things," followed in frequency by "I have too much schoolwork and homework," and "I have trouble finding books that I like." (This third answer was the top response selected in the 2006 survey.) Boys outnumbered girls by 10% in all age categories in stating that they had trouble finding enjoyable books.

In terms of technology, the study found that more children ages eight and up spend time online than read for pleasure on a daily basis. However, the finding has a silver lining. "High frequency Internet users are more likely to read books for fun every day," said Heather Carter, director of corporate research at Scholastic in a statement. "That suggests that parents and teachers can tap into kids' interest in going online to spark a greater interest in reading books."

Nearly two-thirds of children ages nine to 17 "extended" the reading experience online, including activities such as visiting an author's Web site, using the Internet to find books by a particular author or visiting a fan site.

Read more at <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6569106.html>

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USA: American Association of University Women Sees No Educational Crisis for Boys (But others do)

Debra Viadero Education Week, 20 May 2008

Even though more women and girls are getting college degrees and scoring in the top ranks on national math tests than was the case in the 1970s, their academic gains have not come at the expense of boys, says a report released today by the American Association of University Women.

Some researchers and advocates have made the case in recent years for a "boys' crisis" in education, pointing out, for instance, that boys have begun to trail girls on key academic indicators, such as in rates of enrollment in and graduation from college.

But the AAUW, the Washington-based group that sparked a national debate about gender disparities in education with a report issued 16 years ago, contends bluntly in its new report that the fears about boys are overstated.

"There is no boys' crisis," Linda D. Hallman, the group's executive director, said in an interview. "On average, both boys' and girls' education performance has improved, and all boats rise on the same tide."

The new report, "Where the Girls Are: The Facts About Gender Equity in Education," also argues for taking a closer look at gender disparities in education and breaking down statistical trends by students' racial, ethnic, and family-income levels, as well as by gender.

Read more at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/06/04/39aauw.h27.html>

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UK: Functionality risks cultural and intellectual impoverishment

Anthea Lipsett The Guardian, July 2, 2008

Teachers have never had a "golden age" when politicians "stood back and let schools get on with it", Lord Adonis, the schools minister, said today. Speaking after meeting teachers at the Prince's Trust summer school in Cambridge, Adonis sought to counter widespread concern among teachers and parents that children were being over-tested.

"Ten years ago, there were a lot of concerns about standards in schools and that was why we introduced an inspection and testing regime," he said.

"There is not so much concern now. And, in terms of the balance on testing and inspection, I think it is about right. Our education policy is working. Standards have risen."

Adonis and the schools secretary, Ed Balls, spent about an hour discussing education issues with geography and science teachers taking part in one of a series of conferences launched by the Prince of Wales.

Earlier this week, the conference director, Bernice McCabe, head of the independent North London Collegiate School, attacked the government's education policies for placing too much emphasis on "functionality" at the risk of "cultural and intellectual impoverishment of a generation of schoolchildren".

"Among teachers who have attended previous summer schools, there has been a widespread feeling that there should be more incentive for them to communicate the richness of their subjects and the sheer enjoyment of studying them," she said. "But it has not always been easy for them to do so because of the way the curriculum and its assessment have been designed."

Adonis said he and Balls had not picked up those messages when meeting teachers at the summer school today.

He told teachers to be wary of thinking that there had been a "golden age" in education. "I don't think there was a golden age where everyone stood back and let schools get on with it," said Adonis. "I would urge caution against this."

Read more at <http://education.guardian.co.uk/schools/story/0,,2288546,00.html>

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USA: Instruction Drives Construction ... Or Should

Frank Kelly Education Week, 30 June 2008

My colleagues and I work for an architecture firm focused on education, so we've attended and made presentations at various gatherings in the field. At one recent conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, we set up a small booth in the exhibit hall featuring images of school buildings we had designed. Most folks passed us by with quizzical looks on their faces, but a few stopped to ask, "Why are you here? This conference is about education."

Having thought that our school designs were all about education, we were perplexed - until we recognized that most of those in attendance were focused on teaching, and that, in their entire careers perhaps, had never had the opportunity to shape the environment in which they taught. At best, they were assigned to a room, allowed to hang posters on the walls, and shuffled rows of desks. The notion that their approach to teaching and learning could be reflected in and enhanced by the school building simply never occurred to them.

Buildings are among the most telling artifacts of what we believe, what we value, and what we think. Western Europe's great cathedrals built in the 12th to 16th centuries leave no doubt about what was most important in their time. While our society in the 21st century is far more diverse, our buildings will speak just as clearly to future generations - including the kids who attend our schools.

What do our school buildings say about what we think is really important? What do schools being built in 2008 around Frederick W. Taylor's and William Wirt's ideas from 1908 say to kids about their futures? What do schools that mimic the architecture of other centuries say to the children within them working on digital devices? Are our school buildings saying what we want to convey to teachers and students?

Read more at http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2008/06/30/43kelly-com_web.h27.html?tmp=156091307

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USA: Put Understanding First

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

The high school curriculum should start with the long-term goals of schooling: meaning-making and transfer of learning.

A local newspaper reporter asks students attending the town's high school to give their school a letter grade from A to F. One young man, a senior, rates his high school a B. When asked to explain, he replies with a single word: "Boring."

A first-year algebra teacher tries to remain enthusiastic in the face of student apathy. Although she attempts to engender a love of math in her students, many typically respond with the same questions, "Why do we need to learn this stuff? When are we ever going to use this?" She's aware that her answers are not convincing.

While lecturing to the vacant-eyed stares of many of his students, the veteran AP U.S. History teacher sometimes feels like the teacher in the film Ferris Bueller's Day Off, who answers his own dull questions. Yet there's so much material to cover to prepare for the upcoming AP exam. What else can he do?

In one district, the results of end-of-year science exams reveal a troubling pattern: Students typically perform adequately on items requiring recall and basic skills but do poorly on items requiring application or careful analysis and explanation.

These vignettes reflect recognizable high school challenges - student displays of boredom, passivity, and apathy; external test pressures that demand superficial content coverage; and students who seem to

know the material but don't know how to apply it. These different problems are, in fact, interrelated. They can be traced to one underlying factor - the lack of clarity about the goals of a high school education and how those goals should inform instruction, assessment, and curriculum design.

Read more at <http://snipr.com/2takc>

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