

Confessions of a Kindergarten Stowaway

I RECALL MANY YEARS AGO WHEN one of my earliest school experiences involved trying to connect with my classmates, teachers and school. I grew up in Niles and attended a public grade school a few blocks from my house. I loved my first year in kindergarten. What was not to love? Unlike today's kindergarten, we didn't do too much "real school work" back then. There was play time, singing songs, breaks for milk and cookies, running around chasing one another at recess, and, my favorite, an afternoon nap each day on the little rug I brought from home. There was even a wooden box in the corner of our classroom with a steering wheel attached. Our teacher, a matronly educator in her final year before retirement, often let me "drive" the corner car box while making engine noises, whipping the wheel left and right, pretending I was racing in the Indianapolis 500. Ah, kindergarten.

FIRST-GRADE, HOWEVER, was another matter. That fall, I arrived on opening day to a room far down the hall from my kindergarten utopia. My new teacher had apparently just completed U.S. Marine Corps drill sergeant training. She promptly informed us that first-grade would be no picnic, thereby giving the word "tough" real meaning to a 6-year-old. No more milk and cookies, no car box and – heaven forbid – no naps. We were there to learn, which could only be achieved through hard work. And she meant hard work.

My youngster's mind did not like this turn of events. After the first day of school, followed by a seemingly endless amount of homework (an evil word), I spent the entire night assessing my options. I quickly dismissed running away to join the circus, as I would miss my hamster. And if the

hamster came along, she might get squashed by an elephant. A solution still eluded me as morning broke and I boarded my school bus.

Upon arriving at school, I saw the kindergarteners being greeted by their new teacher. She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen, and she smelled good, too. In a flash, I made a quick decision. I jumped lines and went off with the kindergarten class instead of joining my fellow first-graders. Remember, this was before computers and instant communication (there were some advantages to this era), so the kindergarten teacher just figured I was a new kid and she welcomed me with the others. Meanwhile, the first-grade drill sergeant was too busy yelling orders to realize I was AWOL.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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I maintained this charade for two full weeks. Cookies, milk, the car box and naps: life was once again wonderful.

As you might expect, the teachers eventually exposed my ruse and I was transferred back to the first-grade military. Fortunately, there were no long-term consequences to my folly, except that while I was AWOL, the first-graders had completely learned the alphabet. For years, the only way I remembered my letters was by reciting the popular children's song, "A, B, C, D, E, F, G..." Aside from my belief that "L, M, N, O, P" was all one letter – which was attributable to my muddled singing – I was able to bluff my way through the alphabet until sixth-grade. Thankfully, the invention of spell check saved me.

Measured responses

Today in Barrington 220, helping students feel welcomed, comfortable and connected at school is such a priority that we measure our performance with annual surveys. The feelings of all youth and their parents are important. In the secondary grades (6-12), we ask each group the identical

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questions regarding the student's school experience to determine if there is agreement or disparity of perceptions. If responses are comparable, we believe we are consistently meeting both student and parent expectations. Conversely, if there are significant differences in the data, we need to take a closer look at that area. Being a former math teacher and a fan of statistics, this analysis is especially interesting to me. Here is what some numbers tell us from our spring 2011 survey:

In response to the statement, "I feel welcomed, listened to, and valued by my teachers," 84 per-

cent of students agreed; similarly, 83 percent of parents agreed this is true of their child's school experience.

In looking out for and accepting other kids, 81 percent of students and 82 percent of parents agreed with the statement, "I know how to support other students who are left out or bullied."

Also close were responses to the statement, "I have at least one trusted adult in the school to whom I can go with a problem," where 74 percent of students and 73 percent of parents agreed this is true.

We are working hard and doing a relatively good job of preparing students for the social-emotional adjustments they often face during their Barrington 220 education. There was one survey question, however, where a gap exists between student and parent responses. When stated that the student feels "prepared to transition to the next level of education," 87 percent of students agreed versus just 68 percent of parents.

As a one-time stowaway who hid in kindergarten because I didn't want to move on, I can empathize with the parents on this one. U