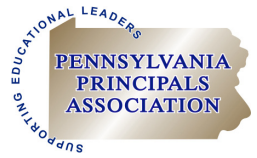


Executive Director's Notepad . . .

The Difference 62 Years Makes



**By Dr. Eric C. Eshbach,
PA Principals
Association
Executive
Director**

Recently, I was going through some of my late father-in-law's "treasures." He tended to hoard things, and the saying, "one man's trash is another man's treasure," came to mind quite often as I wondered, "why in the world would he have kept this stuff?" One of his "treasures" was a full page from the *York Sunday News*, dated February 12, 1961. I understood his rationale for keeping this section of the newspaper, as it included an article about the grist mill his grandfather owned and operated since the early 1900s. What caught my attention, however, were the articles on the other side of the page. In large print at the top of the page was the headline, "Principals Told to Eliminate Grade Levels," and the subtitle read, "Educator Says Students Should Progress According to Abilities" (Hodenfield, 1961, p.38). The article summarized a speech given by B. Frank Brown to the annual conference of the National Association of Secondary School Principals in Detroit. In his, no doubt, controversial speech, Brown, the principal of the nation's only ungraded high school at that time, told attendees at the conference that traditional grade levels from first through 12th grade should be abandoned and students should be allowed to "race ahead or plod along according to their individual abilities" (Hodenfield, 1961, p.38). Brown informed the crowd of examples of students in his high school who had taken college-level calculus at the same time as a remedial English course. He concluded by stating that the only casualty in the ungraded high school system would most likely be varsity athletics, which in his view, probably would not exist in the future because it wouldn't meet the needs of this new school view (Hodenfield, 1961, p.38). I admit that I laughed at this because athletics in high schools has not diminished in any way, shape or form. If it had, many of you who are high school principals and assistant principals would have a great deal more time to yourselves!

On the opposite side of that *York Sunday News* page was the article, "Grade Schools Get Science Course" (1961). It outlined how the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction (the predecessor of the Pennsylvania Department of Education) was designing a course and distributing books to teachers on Earth Science that kindergartners could understand. While some had suggested that Earth Science was too advanced for young minds, Dr. Paul Glatzert, Director of the Bureau of Curriculum Services, reminded the reader that children were "playing with research" all the time (Grade Schools Get Science Course, 1961). He suggested that while some think the concept of inertia is too complex for the five-year-old learner, "What child does not know how to play marbles? So, what child couldn't grasp the meaning of inertia when a teacher rolls one marble against another?" (Grade Schools Get Science Course, 1961).

While I read these articles 62 years after they were written, the environment in which they were written did not escape me. This was the era of Sputnik and the space race. Every effort was being made to improve the American education system to compete with the Soviets. It didn't take 62 years for the realization of a system where middle school students in the district where I served as superintendent had to cross the parking lot to the high school to take more challenging math classes, or when I, an 11th grader, took chemistry with 10th and 12th graders. It didn't take 62 years for the kindergartners in the school where I served as principal to engage in play-based learning that extended their understanding of science, math, music and reading concepts. When the American education system has been encouraged and motivated by world events, economic need, environmental issues and the latest research on learning or child development, our system has met the challenge.

It also made me wonder what my grandchildren would be reading about the public education system in 2085, 62 years after I wrote this article. Will they snicker at the online articles denouncing character education programs as indoctrination? Will they be thankful that the way reading is taught in 2085 is truly the right way and we can finally put the reading wars behind us? Will they be thankful that science standards and curricula were adopted that ensured students understood the role humans played in harming the environment? Will they wonder what it was like to go to a school building, sit in rows of seats for seven hours a day and wait for a bell to ring indicating it was time to stop learning? No doubt, they will laugh at any suggestion of eliminating athletics in schools as they get ready to compete in the next e-sports league, or, dare I say it, go out to the pickleball court for the next match.

The decisions that are being made in school board meetings, in Harrisburg and in Washington, D.C., will impact my grandchildren. Reuben, Canaan, Maggie and Mara will learn differently than their parents did and in schools that look and operate differently. In 2085, my great-grandchildren will read headlines (most likely online instead of in a hard copy) from 2023. I hope they are as thankful as I am about the decisions and changes that were made and written about in 1961. I hope they can see that 2023 marked positive changes in education policy and legislation allowing our schools to continue to evolve and meet the needs of our children, our communities, our nation, our world, our economy and our environment. I also hope the only thing that causes them to chuckle and shake their heads is that someone believed that high school athletics would one day be a thing of the past.

References

Grade Schools Get Science Course. (1961, February 12). *York Sunday News*.

Hodenfield, G. K. (1961, February 16). Principals Told to Eliminate Grade Levels. *Associated Press. York Sunday News*, p.38.

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