

The Longest Day

From teaching high school to surviving first grade

It starts with a tentative wave goodbye, a kiss blown from lips trying hard not to quiver, and steps that take us away from the ones we love the most. It's the first day of school, and that scene describes both parents and children trying to cope with the transition from the familiarity of home to the great unknown that is school.

Years later those steps will be the ones we hear as our children bound up the stairs and across the stage at graduation. How is it possible that the accumulation of days filled with books and paste and projects translate into the incredible growth from pre-kindergarten to 12th grade? Like a doting relative, we in District 220 share in the wonder of your child's growth and development every step of the way.

As you probably know, most of my career has been devoted to teaching high school students the wonders of polynomial equations and the ambiguous case of the Law of Sines. My mom, on the other hand, taught first grade for over 30 years in Niles. She adored her job, loved the kids, and over the years became something of a legend in her small school. Since I was teaching high school math, our conversations at times would turn to a discussion of which level was "harder to teach." In the end, we would always agree it was a silly debate. Teaching high school seniors was different from teaching first-graders, but they both hold their own challenges and their own rewards. It always was apparent to me how much energy it took for my mom to spend long days with 20 to 30 six-year-olds. Even though she would never want to do anything else, she would come home each day utterly exhausted.

My role as superintendent in a K-12 school district finally gives me the opportunity to truly experience the exhilaration my mom felt every day and to develop a better understanding of elementary education. So on a cold day late last January, I ventured into the fascinating world of first grade as a guest teacher for the day at North Barrington School. Although I always enjoy visit-

ing classes and having lunch with kids at our various schools, I was eager to begin my complete, full-day immersion experience.

Luckily for me, we have a fabulous team of first-grade teachers throughout the district. When I entered Mrs. Lebda's classroom, it was clear that in the first five months of the year, she had established a routine that provided a predictable structure for her students' home away from home. Mrs. Lebda's classroom is welcoming and focused on learning. The walls are filled with colorful bulletin boards with centers devoted to phonics, reading groups, and a small area with a rocking chair (donated by a past class) for the teacher to read to her students.

The room is equipped with a Sound Field – an amazing system that provides the teacher or student with a microphone so all students anywhere in the room can clearly hear what is being taught. It should be noted that these Sound Fields are one of the major projects funded by the District 220 Foundation (www.220foundation.org). It was clear in my first two hours that without this Sound Field my voice would have been a casualty by noon. In retrospect, the absence of Sound Fields in my mom's school probably contributed to her exhaustion.

It is amazing to reenter the world of the six-year-old. Everything is new and exciting. The energy level is high, and they can move from one emotion to another in a millisecond. In the high school classroom, most of the kids want to portray some level of "cool." Whereas in a first-grade classroom, there are no pretensions, the kids are all "real," and their biggest concerns are the next task at hand, who they will play with at recess, or what they will have for lunch.

As I read the book I chose expressly for this class, *Rotten Richie and the Ultimate Dare* by Patricia Polacco, I was struck by the children's eagerness to share their ideas and the questions that tumbled unabashedly out of their mouths. During math instruction, I was humbled by their enthusiasm for completing the practice problems and for getting it "right." No one asked, "Will this be on the test?" or "How many points is this assignment worth?" And recess – I'm

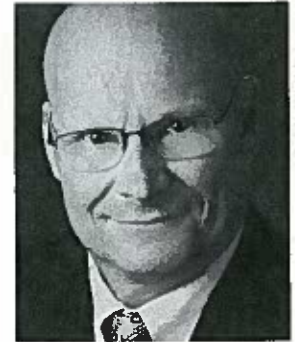


PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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convinced it will eliminate stress from your life, prevent colds and the flu, and could probably cure cancer!

We also made Valentine's Day cards on the laptop computers, ate lunch together, ran around like crazy during physical education, walked quietly in our lines to art class, and finally, dressed our winter clothing to return home by bus. Fortunately, I learned quickly that it pays to ask for "helpers." The kids love helping, and it allowed me to pace myself throughout the day.

It was clear to me at the end of the day that I had learned more from this experience than 22 of my charges. It gave me a renewed respect for the amazing work our elementary teachers do every day and an intense appreciation for the hugs I received from my students – something rarely experienced teaching high school. I can tell you that, like my mom, I was both exhausted and exhilarated by this experience. My hat goes off to all elementary teachers who navigate the world of our precious children. They create a magical world of learning for the young, but I can now tell you firsthand, it ain't easy.

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