

Letter To The Editor: What I Have Learned from Sixth Graders

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For the last 28 years of my life, I've had the distinct pleasure of being involved, in one way or another, in the annual rite of passage that comes with becoming a sixth grader. For most of us, this momentous occasion is simply a memory that we have stored away in our minds with all the other good and bad we experienced in our middle school years. But for me, being privy to the annual event of sixth graders learning how to use a combination lock has become a pleasant highlight in my career as an educator.

Now, don't get me wrong: as a sixth-grade homeroom teacher, the actual responsibility of making certain that these students learned how to manipulate a lock was not fun. The

constant forgetting of the locker combination, the failing to remember if it was left first or right first, and the ever-present question of why it was necessary to pass that second number once was sometimes daunting. As a young teacher in my twenties, I would sometimes become easily frustrated. I'd try not to let my students see it, but there were times I lost the battle with myself, inadvertently letting out a deep sigh or grunt, and their sad expressions showed that I had hurt some feelings. But, like all educators, I learned to appreciate this part of my teaching career and to savor the fact that I was able to help my students notch a small victory during their first few days of junior high school. And each year, with a little bit of luck, as the first weeks of school passed, the questions slowly stopped, and the three-number combinations were locked into memory—at least until the end of Christmas break.

As a principal, I was promoted to “helper.” I wasn't exactly responsible for these students learning how to use their lockers any longer — I was now just helping when needed. On “Meet the Teacher” night, when crowds of students and parents were present, my authority on lock opening was utilized. I would, once again, provide my expertise and bask in the joy of watching an 11-year-old successfully snap open his lock. Once the school year started, I would occasionally walk the hall and find one of them standing alone, frustrated, trying their hardest to open their lock and not be late for class. In these instances, I would often simply ask for the combination, open it, and get them to class before they were given a tardy. But even as a principal, I'd get to glimpse the progression of lock mastery, although I would sometimes not remember to look for it until Halloween. I'd find myself busy with the curriculum needs, paper work, and discipline issues that eat up too much of a principal's day.

Now, as a superintendent, it's not often I get to help with locks. Although I am fortunate to have my office located just feet from the “sixth-grade hallway,” I am not as intricate a part of the ritual initiation into the lock-learning mysteries. My episodes of assisting with locks have dwindled to maybe two or three a year now. I will admit that I sometimes savor getting to help a struggling student while, at the same time, not believing that they could possibly be old enough to be a sixth grader. They often remind me of coming to read to them in kindergarten or first grade as I work their combination and watch them glow with admiration at my lock-opening prowess.

But, I want to officially acknowledge here just what my own little accomplishment as a master lock opener really means to me. I will try to explain my reasons. First, I was fortunate to teach the poetry of William Cullen Bryant, the novels of John Steinbeck, and the plays of William Shakespeare. I loved each and every day I was given the opportunity to teach. But, I will admit, some of the most fulfilling days were those watching a student master the manipulation of a simple locking device. The joy that filled them from learning something brand new will always be a gift I received every August.

Second, I'm still a sixth grader at heart. Not being able to open a lock is scary for a sixth grader. You're going to be late to class. All your friends (the most important people in the galaxy) have rushed into class, leaving you alone to wrestle with this mechanism, and there is more than the off chance that your teacher will be "fed up" with you and yell at you in front of "everybody." And being nervous only makes one's chances of opening a lock less likely. Your hands sweat, your mind whirls, and the aching feeling of maybe crying starts to ebb into your throat. And then, we compound this awful situation for these young students. We tell them it's not a big deal. We tell them that when they get older, they will have much more important things to worry about. As an expert in lock opening, I know these words are no comfort. For a sixth grader, the struggle of lock mastery is real. I guess what I am trying to state is that I completely understand their feelings. I still become overwhelmed with worry and sometimes live in my own imagination, where every problem ends with me having to deal with the worst-case scenario. Will we be receiving all our school funding? Will we find enough qualified teachers and substitutes? And my personal worries are never far behind. Will my daughter love teaching her new second-grade students as much as she did her fifth-graders? Will my son find joy in the long hours of study in law school? Will my jealousy of my wife, she being a principal, ever stop? My experiences with locks and 11-year-olds have taught me to try my hardest to appreciate small victories and worry less about what others might be thinking of my struggles. I am going to commit to enjoying the difficulties that come with running a school district. I will embrace the challenge in a way that only a sixth grader could.

And lastly, as a veteran educator, I have started spending more time thinking about the end of my career. Will I still have worth? I am in no hurry to stop working, and the thought of not earning money, even when I am receiving my pension is well, unthinkable. But, my father told me once that the hardest thing about aging is becoming less relevant. Becoming less important and less needed can be a scary thought. So, as we start this new school year, I am going to try to remember what I tell my sixth-grade friends when I am provided the opportunity to help them navigate the task of safely locking away all their precious new school supplies. Celebrate that you are trying your hardest. Everything gets easier with time. You will be successful if you just keep trying. And while you're celebrating trying your hardest, try your hardest not to worry about something that hasn't even happened, and instead, focus on your goals. I'm going to try my utmost to heed my own advice this year.

Here at Wood River-Hartford School District, we have had a rough couple of years. The pandemic was difficult for us all, and navigating the added challenges of remote teaching while trying to help keep everyone healthy was a challenge that we hope is drawing to a close. Added to that, we had a fire in one of our elementary schools, which forced us to close the entire campus. But, we are back. With a newly renovated building, some federal funds to help navigate our continuing remediation process, and even some

decent state funding that we hope will continue to trend upward. If I'm able to combine that with all the knowledge I have accrued from 28 years of helping sixth graders with their locks, this could be the best year of my career. And just maybe, this means I will be able to do my part in making certain that all our students, teachers, and staff have an amazing school year. Who knows, maybe one day we will all figure out why we need to pass that second number once.

Have a great school year, and remember to appreciate the gift of being an educator, parent, or that most magical of things, a sixth grader.

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Wood River-Hartford School District #15

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