

## Two bouquets from the parched garden of childhood

The flowers in the first bouquet reverberate with shock.

- When we have a security 3 drill, we go into lock down she said. It only seems to bother the kids when it happens at the end of the day. Then we have to tell them we can't go home quite yet till the principal says OK
- They called the driver to say when you drop the handicapped child off for day care at the school, park on the side street and the police will bring you into the building under cover. But she was just a volunteer and wasn't used to these 'safety measures'. Perhaps we should just bring her home to our house, she said.
- The physical therapist was itinerant, serving several schools so no school could give her a key to the mobile classroom she used; in one school she was to knock on the window and a child would come to the door and open it but in the next one children are taught never to respond when someone knocks at the window even if they know the person. It was hard to remember which was which sometimes.
- This tornado drill was for real; a tornado had been sighted so all the little children were seated along the corridor walls, bent over, their hands protecting their heads. Only their quiet sobbing broke that silence until the school social worker came in and saw the scene. She went from child to child, comforting them and helping them cope with the panic attack of the grownups.
- Seems like we have more and more 'duck and cover' drills these days – its like back in the 50's when we hid under our desks practicing for a nuclear attack and some families built bomb shelters in their back yards she said.

As adults we jump at the chance to do something, anything to keep from facing our mortality. Our fear of death overrides our delight in being alive and we succumb to the drills, alerts, screenings and warnings of the day. In the name of safety, do we create a climate of terror for our children?

And in the name of excellence, are we also creating a climate of isolation, competition and increasing stress for them? Consider the next bouquet.

- First, the administration instituted national mandates to test all grade school and high school students and the schools adapted.
- Texas decided to eliminate recess to create more teaching time and Georgia followed suit.
- CSAP isn't just a goal, it's the only goal said one desperate Colorado school district as it moved to cut out the arts to build in more time for academics.
- Long forgotten are the studies that found schools starting an hour later had significantly higher test scores, that schools with the strongest arts programs had the highest achievement scores and that schools forced to go to double shifts and 4 hour teaching days found no decline in performance levels.
- Asthma attacks in inner city schools have reached epidemic proportions, learning disabilities are escalating, and Ritalin prescriptions have doubled but these are not seen as stress related phenomena.
- Now the administration has turned its attention toward the preschool population, proposing to test them three times a year to monitor whether they are learning phonics yet.
- Where are the protesters to speak on behalf of childhood, on the importance of play and imagination, the need for movement to complete the sensory integration process, the creation of near sightedness from the strain of early focusing on the printed page, the need to foster social language and a sense of community before introducing written language with its demand that the reader rise up to meet the words with a sense of self.
- Who can still recall the old studies showing higher literacy rates in countries that start reading at age seven than those starting reading at age five or the studies showing that temporary gains in literacy among first and second graders in intensive early reading programs tend to fade out by grade three or four. And who has the courage to remind the legislators?

**Wanted: Fresh flowers for a more vibrant bouquet**

- First flower -- the school had two remedial reading classrooms – one of the teachers always brought her dog to class with her – her children’s scores were dramatically higher.
- Next flower?

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