



HEADLINES

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Return to Sender

I guess that I missed the mark!

Last spring we spent considerable time and effort speaking with kids about the very public nature of "private" communication on the internet. In two assemblies and a parent session, we had outside resource people come in and explain to our students how exposed they really were in their emails, texting, tweets, and especially on Facebook.

What they were just beginning to grasp was that the actual audience for their comments was far broader than their intended one. Facebook "friends" quite regularly cut and paste or forward personal comments to people who were never intended to read them. And, once they are hung out there on the line for everyone to read, it is virtually (and physically!) impossible to reel them back in. After much discussion and sharing of experiences, I began to feel like the kids were getting it, and that in some small way, maybe we were helping them to self-edit what they were willing to share with the world. But, I feel now that I may have missed the mark.

This fall I realized that we were directing our efforts at the wrong target (or rather at only one of our at-risk groups). As the school year began to unfold, I was reminded of the high volume of email traffic that goes back and forth between school and home and the extent to which some it was inappropriate, confrontational or just plain rude. Now don't get me wrong, I believe that everyone needs the chance to vent. The difficulty is that in our age of instant messaging, what might have been a rant at the dinner table, followed by some reflection and perhaps tempered in conversation with friends and family members is, instead, often immediately shot through cyberspace at an unsuspecting target.

I remember as a young teacher getting worked up about an issue and broadcasting to my friends my incredibly brilliant (and undoubtedly simplistic) solution to a complex issue around the running of my school district. So confident was I of the clarity and justice of my position that I typed up a letter to the local Superintendent of Schools outlining my complaints and building an airtight case for my solution. Fortunately for me, I decided to share it with my Principal before I sent it off. He read it, chuckled and said: "Do you feel better now for having written it all out?" When I admitted that I did, he gave me a piece of advice that has stayed with me. He said: "Now tear it up and throw it in the trash." I was taken aback, so blinded was I by the devastating logic of my arguments and the moral high ground of my point of view. But he saw

it for what it was, a healthy letting off of steam, a little bit of big-mouthed posturing and, not worth damaging a relationship (and perhaps my career!) over. His basic position was that if it was not worth picking up the phone, or making an appointment over, it was probably not worth sharing. Effective communication is nuanced. It assumes a relationship, either personal or professional, and it depends on the opportunity for actual give and take. It is also most effective when it takes place in a calm and cordial atmosphere of sharing and collaborative problem-solving. Time was that this is how most parent-teacher conversations took place – a phone call, a pop in visit, or a formal interview - personal, face to face, human interaction. But, that is often no longer the case.

In our age of instant messaging, our initial outrage over an issue has become the stuff of public record. Comments permanently posted on the web arrive there without context, and without the tone of voice, or note of exasperation or raised eyebrow that would cause a personal audience to take it with a grain of salt and see it for what it was. As adults, we should know better, and as parents and professional educators, we should do better. Every teacher and administrator receives the occasional critical (and often accusatory) email from a parent about some perceived injustice done to their daughter or son. In our instant age, we all know how this happens. A person gets upset, bangs something out and sends it. The content and language are such that they would never use over the phone or in person. But in an email or in a Facebook comment they can make the most incendiary remarks without fear of interruption or correction. All too often, the teacher or administrator, offended and upset by what they perceive to be an unwarranted attack, responds in kind. Each party's spin on things becomes a part of the permanent cyber record and no matter how many subsequent conversations or comments lower the temperature of the exchange, the original comments remain, white hot, frozen in time and cyberspace.

Having all suffered from these abuses of electronic communication we should, and must, do better to prevent ourselves from committing them as well. The reality is however, that once we press "send", the damage has been done. The ripple effects of a rash email are unpredictable - hopefully they dissipate as quickly as hurricane Bill - but perhaps, if we're lucky, the lesson learned will have much more permanence.

UPCOMING EVENTS



Winter Carnival (MYP)

December 17th

Holiday Football Tournament

December 18th

First Day Winter Term

January 5th