

From a Principal's Files

EVA W. SKINNER and EMMA A. SCHAD

These letters tell the story of cooperation during one school year between the parents and the school staff in a neighborhood in Baltimore where responsibility was shared in providing real learning experiences. Mrs. John W. Skinner is the parent and co-author with Emma A. Schad, principal of the Garrison Junior High School, Baltimore, Maryland.

THE LETTERS—in the chronology of one year—represent the development of our school's plan to have parents and teachers share with pupils in providing learning experiences. As can be noted from the letters, parents and faculty moved slowly at the beginning, each not too sure of what to give up and what to take on. In time the two groups worked more closely together, ultimately not identifying their views as parental or teacher comments but as people intensely interested in the growth and development of the children at the Garrison Junior High School.

Dear Mrs. Skinner,

For some years we have had a group of teachers working as a committee on the improvement of community relationships. Almost every time you pick up educational reading material or one of the regular periodicals you find some reference to this subject. We believe that most of our difficulty lies in the fact that we talk too much without actually doing something to help the situation. Probably one of the reasons we haven't succeeded too well in making a bona fide job out of our community relationships is that we have neglected the most important thing, namely, the views of the parents.

We should like to have you serve as a member of a parents' committee that would act in an advisory capacity with our teachers' committee. In other words, before we formulate our program, the parents' advisory committee would discuss the whole matter from the parents' viewpoint with the teachers so that the plan that finally goes into effect will be the result of this cooperative undertaking. Working together in such a manner should lay a firmer foundation for any project undertaken.

The first meeting of the committee of teachers and parents will be held on Wednesday, at eleven o'clock, before the opening of school this term. We hope that this meeting will provide the impetus for future activities that will bring about more meaningful relationships in the school community.

We are anticipating the pleasure of working with you.

Sincerely yours,
Emma Schad,
Principal

Dear Miss Schad,

I want to thank you for your congratulatory note in reference to my election as chairman of our parents' committee. I appreciate the confidence placed in me, and trust that I shall be

worthy of it. Perhaps you wonder why I was hesitant in my acceptance. I must confess that I turned the question over in my mind a number of times before I reached my decision.

My first reaction was, "Oh! I can't do it, it will take too much time. Besides, there are many others who could do it much better than I." As I was trying to gather my points as a "conscientious objector," a picture flashed through my mind of the children in other parts of the world, how they are suffering today—hungry, homeless, frightened. I thought, as American parents surely we should be grateful that most of our children have a large measure of happiness, security, and opportunity. When a call comes to accept a bit of responsibility, we should be ready and willing.

I am firmly convinced that the cornerstone upon which society is built must be made of three blocks—church, whatever our faith may be; home, whether it be a castle or a cottage; and school, whether a little red school house upon the hill or a large school in the crowded city. Unless these three blocks are sterling in nature, cemented firmly together, the better world of which we all dream will not be realized.

With that thought and picture in my mind, I had the courage to say, "Yes, I am willing to help."

Sincerely yours,
Eva W. Skinner

Dear Mrs. Skinner,

At the next meeting of the Parent-Teacher Committee, we wish to present a new plan for the in-coming 7B's, and before the meeting we should like to



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have your frank reaction to our proposal.

We believe that the present set-up of the junior high school could be revised to make a better adjustment for sixth grade children who, leaving the elementary school where they have been well-known and understood, enter oftentimes a much larger organization with an entirely different program. In the course of their first year they may have to adjust to as many as eleven different personalities among their teachers.

In the *homeroom-centered curriculum*, as we call our suggested integrated plan, the 7B children would stay with their homeroom teachers from the opening of school in the morning until ten minutes to twelve. During that time, they would be taught English, reading, civics, and geography—not as separate subjects, but as a part of an interrelated program having meaning and importance for these children. For example, in the first half of the seventh grade, three units would be developed with the children, namely, "Know Your School," "Know Your Community," and "Know Your City." It is our firm conviction that although the studies will proceed along entirely different lines, the chil-

dren will learn at least the minimum subject requirements and probably a great deal more. After lunch the children will follow the conventional schedule of classes in other subjects.

Real opportunities to apply language skills, to develop geographic understandings, and to engender better civic attitudes will be provided through frequent field trips taken within the school day at the time when a particular community resource pertains to the work being studied. Perhaps most important of all, with children staying with the same teacher for three hours each day, there will be greater opportunity for child guidance and development.

This is a very brief sketch of the homeroom-centered curriculum plans, but we hope it is sufficient for you to get an overview of the situation. Further details will be expanded at the meeting.

May we have the reactions of your group before the large committee meeting? It will help so much when the program is presented for consideration by the entire committee.

Sincerely yours,
Emma Schad

Dear Miss Schad,

In answer to your recent letter I must say that, although the term "Homeroom-Centered Curriculum" is new and rather vague to me, I feel confident that a program such as you have described has many advantages.

I have always felt that a child leaving the small elementary school of a few hundred, and entering the large junior high school of several thousand, has a very difficult adjustment to make. He is lost and bewildered in such a

complex organization. I recall a statement my young daughter made the first week she attended junior high school. Although on the surface she tried to act very grown up, she entered this new experience filled with fear. At the end of the second day she said, "Mother, you know I believe you could drop dead in that school and no one would know it." Surely a gradual adjustment, where there is greater opportunity for children to know their teacher and classmates and be known by them, creates an atmosphere of friendliness and cooperation which makes for better teacher-pupil relationships.

We do have one suggestion we should like to make before you launch this new program. Why not invite the parents of the pupils who will be enrolled in these classes to attend a meeting? The basic pattern and outstanding characteristics of such a program with its many advantages can be explained so that everyone will fully understand the meaning of the term, "Homeroom-Centered Curriculum."

I am glad, too, that this parent-school relationship which we have initiated, will permit parents to offer suggestions that might finally become a part of the program. One of the things that impresses me about our approach is that we have left things in a fluid state so that there might be changes as the result of ideas proposed by parents, teachers, and pupils.

There is one question in my mind that I should like to have cleared up. In this new experimental study you said that field trips could be made during school time without upsetting schedules. Is this necessary, in view of the fact that the children have many such experiences

with their parents? Could not the time in school be used to greater advantage? I have heard many parents make this same criticism. Perhaps we could reach a better understanding if these points are discussed at our meeting.

Sincerely yours,
Eva Skinner

Dear Mrs. Skinner,

Your suggestion that we consider the purpose and advantages of the home-room-centered curriculum program with the parents before we actually enroll their children in that course is an excellent one. How about finding some way to bring the pupils into the planning? Perhaps we can discuss this at our next meeting.

We shall invite the parents of the prospective 7B pupils to a meeting at which we will formulate the first draft of the program.

We think it will be wise to have that particular group of parents not only represented on the Parent-Teacher Committee, but we should also like to have a sub-committee composed entirely of these parents to help us guide the program. The suggestion has been made that a descriptive report card, which will give a record of the work accomplished by the children in the homeroom-centered curriculum, be developed. Since the parents have to understand these records in order to know how their children are progressing, it will be well to have them participate in the actual making of the form to be used. Thus they will be able to interpret this new type of report to the rest of the parents.

The fact that you question the value of field trips for children in this school

makes me feel that we, as teachers, need to revise some of our thinking in this area. If children in this neighborhood take many directed trips with their parents, then our program ought to supplement, or at least be integrated with, parent-conducted trips, rather than replace them. Wouldn't it be a good idea to have parents, teachers, and pupils talk this over and work out a program that has direct application and value to the Garrison community?

Sincerely yours,
Emma Schad

Dear Miss Schad,

The other day we got a lot out of the cooperatively planned program for field trips. The philosophy which we formulated together has given me a new interpretation of a statement I recently read, "Take the school more and more outside the classroom. Bring the outside world into the classroom."

Perhaps many other parents had the same false conception I had of the excursion as a teaching technique. Most of us grew up thinking that the three R's should occupy the entire school program; now we're being introduced to the value of the three E's: Experiencing, Expressing, Exploring.

Since you are planning for some trips in the near future, why not ask several parents from the various classes to accompany the group? The teacher might feel the parents are infringing, but I really think they would be a help to her in many ways. Surely several extra adults could help in the management of a group of enthusiastic teen-agers. In case of an emergency the parent would be of service, as well as explaining the situation to the other parents. I also be-



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lieve the parent would develop a more sympathetic attitude toward the teacher's many problems.

Children like to have their parents move in the school group and participate in its activities. This meeting new experiences together makes life richer and fuller for both parent and child—the home and the school. Since we all feel it is essential there should be utmost cooperation between the school and the community, I believe greater interest in school activities will be created if more parents are asked to assume responsibility.

Sincerely yours,
Eva Skinner

Dear Mrs. Skinner,

When the teachers were discussing the fun and help they have had with so many parents sharing the excursions, they expressed a desire to widen the field for such activities.

Parents are always welcome to attend any of the assemblies as spectators, but we should like also to have them participate in the program. Having parents do

things with their children promotes the kind of family relationships we aim to develop.

Some sort of survey should be made in order to discover what hidden talents there are among our parents, and perhaps they would be willing to arrange for several assemblies each year. This would enhance the value of the school programs and certainly create interest in them.

We had a fine example of parent cooperation the other day in the science class which had started the study of the automobile. One of the children volunteered the information that her father knew everything there was to know about the motor. And sure enough, he did. He brought a motor the next day and explained to the children just what did what. Not only has he volunteered his services again, but he donated the engine to the school.

Now we are looking for more experts. There are bound to be fathers and mothers who could add their wealth of experience to such clubs as the Chess, Garden, K-9, Magic, Photography,

Pigeon, Public Speaking, and Future Homemakers of America.

The celebration of Halloween is one of the affairs we believe should be of a community nature, and in this we need the cooperation of the parents. Will you be sure to take this matter up with your group and get their ideas on the subject? Some communities in the city do an excellent job along this line. It will be wise to contact some of the organizations in town that have been successful with Halloween affairs. With our large school and its many facilities we should be able to entice the children off the streets on Halloween.

I apologize for such a lengthy letter, but I want you to have some idea of what we already do to encourage parents to work and play with us so that your committee may have a working basis on which to plan more and better things for the children.

You should know that the group of parents you were instrumental in forming is doing a wonderful job of working with the counselors in planning meetings to explain choices of curricula in the high schools. Your enthusiasm has infected others and we are truly grateful to you and all the other parents.

Sincerely yours,
Emma Schad

Dear Miss Schad,

According to the many fine reports I have heard from both children and parents, the excursions have been a great success, especially the trip to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. I am sure the real values of the field trip which you explained at our Parents Committee meeting were realized. The children

did learn many things they couldn't get from books, and yet all agree books and pamphlets were necessary to prepare for the trip to get the most out of it. As one boy said, "It's a swell way to go to school. I can see everything much better. And I even like my teachers more now."

The thing that impressed me especially was the good time everyone had. I believe the children, as well as the parents, feel closer to the teachers after these pleasant, friendly experiences together. I think it was a real demonstration of the quotation, "A good teacher is a vitalizer of life, not a merchant of facts."

The success of these activities opens up new avenues and opportunities for our Parents Committee. I feel it is very important that boys and girls be surrounded by the proper outside influences. Community needs in this respect are increasing daily.

In our last meeting of the parents and teachers, it was suggested that a survey be made in order to find out which parents are interested in sharing with the teachers and children their special interests and hobbies. The committee appointed to do that work has made a fine start and I understand they have the names of some parents who will have real contributions to make to the various clubs at Garrison. I believe, with this particular sub-committee leading the way, we can make real progress in providing a worthwhile recreational program. Certainly we all agree that the leisure time and social hours contribute greatly to the child's development.

Sincerely yours,
Eva Skinner

Dear Eva,

This is a brief thank you note for another job well done. We're delighted with the number of parents who not only have a wide variety of knowledges, skills, and interests, but have indicated their whole-hearted willingness to share them with the children and teachers. As the children say, we are really going places. Many thanks again to you and your wonderful committee of parents.

Sincerely yours,

Emma

Dear Emma,

"Thirty days hath September, April, June and November." How swiftly days pass into weeks and weeks into months. It seems such a short while ago since I was asked to assume the chairmanship of our Parents Committee, and

now we have reached the end of another school year. Although I hesitated to accept the responsibility, I want to say how much I have enjoyed the work. Interest, cooperation, and friendship have certainly been shown throughout all of our activities.

I am sure we, as parents and teachers, feel that nothing less than the best is good enough for the children in our care. Making the world better by rearing a better generation is our goal. Through our work together during the year, I believe we have strived to develop in our children *depth* of understanding, *breadth* of interest, and *height* of aspiration. May we always be willing to play our part. In a very real sense we build tomorrow's world today.

Sincerely yours,

Eva

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