

COMMENTARY

Teachers made all the difference

BY KAITLIN MURPHY

Recently I learned that my hometown school system in Barrington, Rhode Island was rated in the Forbes Top 10 "Best Schools for your Real Estate Buck".

I attended public school in Barrington, ranked fourth in the nation by Forbes, from the second grade through high school. In the decades that followed I learned a lot about education — from my students, other teachers, research, and from the experience of working for Michelle Rhee and her education reform team at the DC Public Schools.

But when I thought about why Barrington, Rhode Island would have made this tiny list, all the research, best practices and controversy over education reform slipped away.

All I could remember were my teachers.

As someone who chose to make a living as a teacher and writer, I could focus on the powerful influence of strong reading and writing teachers.

For example, my sixth-grade language arts teacher, Mrs. Rahmne, paired up with a colleague and had both clusters not only read Katherine Paterson's "Bridge to Terabithia," but also co-write a play based on the novel and perform it for the school. Somehow they created a space for 60 imaginations to run wild while simultaneously imposing the structure that the writing process needed.

But if my family is right, I loved reading from the point my older sister helped teach me to read my first words from a faded blue Dick and Jane reading primer. By middle school, I don't think my parents' summer reading incentives were necessary to get me flying through the classics, uh, ... Sweet Valley High series ... during summer vacations.

The teachers I remember the most taught subjects I wanted to

ignore.

Mrs. Boisvert relentlessly sought to find connections between biology and our daily lives. One day she wrote on the board, "Why the Person Sitting Next to You Just Breathed in Your Spaghetti Dinner from Last Night." She easily transitioned our disgust into rapt interest in the process of cellular respiration.

For her, giving us authority over our fruit fly jars that year was worth every accidental mass fruit-fly escape — if it meant we might catch her enthusiasm for the benefits of the genotype and phenotype discovery to medicine.

I did not care about biology before her. After one year with her, I signed up for AP Biology, still unsure if I could handle it but knowing she would be the teacher.

Mr. Eddins taught history and political science, and he loved to provoke us into debate. He would force us to take a stand based on the facts, and he never let us get away with an easy or convenient answer. He came into class nearly aflame when the Berlin Wall came down, firing questions at us and pulling us out of our apathy to think about the event's impact on the future of democracy, freedom and the world.

Mr. Telford put popular songs to math terms in middle school to make sure we would remember them. He once had us almost convinced that Prince's hit "Raspberry Beret" was actually "Red Spherical Thing." I still sing Mr. Telford's version when I hear the song today.

Mr. Tobiasz, my pre-calculus and calculus teacher in high school, knew long before "The Case Against Homework" that homework was only as good as the teacher who assigned it. He used homework as a launch-pad for his lessons, having students volunteer to write out the problems on the board, then teach the path to our answers to the class. These lessons lifted a huge block for me in math once I saw how

many different ways there were to a right answer. The subject never became easy, but I signed on for calculus the next year because I knew Mr. Tobiasz would be the teacher.

Finally, I wish coaches could be included more often in our discussions about teachers. Annmarie Marino is still the track and cross-country coach in Barrington, and the lessons she taught are still ripening now — lessons about pacing in running and life, cultivating grace in competition and navigating the challenge of pushing and besting myself.

My teachers were not cool. They wore dorky ties in flagrant disregard for our strict, peer-enforced social mores borne of self-consciousness. The best of them showed us how to take the content seriously without taking ourselves too seriously. They oozed with crazy-passion for their subject areas. They paced electric across their classrooms, fueled by questions and sheer joy in the behaviors of protons, fruit flies and DNA; protagonists and melodies; formulas and functions; governments and rebellions.

Eventually they sent us on our way, with their lessons and love for learning following us out the door.

No school system is perfect, and as I imagine is true for everyone, there were some classrooms I wish I could have dodged. But when I remember my teachers in Barrington, Rhode Island, one thing is clear. If my hometown has one of the Top 10 public school systems for the real estate dollar, the teachers made it so.

Editor's note: Kaitlin Murphy worked as a middle, high school and college teacher for 10 years before joining Michelle Rhee's education reform team at D.C. public schools as a writer in 2007. This article ran in studentsfirst.org. Ms. Murphy blogs on www.kaitlinmurphy.org.

No-show contractor says he will return the money

A Boxwood Court resident filed a complaint on Monday, June 27 with the Barrington Police Department after getting into a dispute with a Bristol contractor.

The resident reportedly found a contractor on Craigslist, paid a deposit for some work, but the contractor failed to start the project.

POLICE REPORT

Monday, June 27

An employee for the janitorial services company that cleans the Barrington Public Safety Complex, which houses the police and fire departments, reportedly arrived for work intoxicated. Rescue personnel transported the 46-year-old Pawtucket man to an area hospital for detox.

Police responded to a domestic dispute. No one was charged.

Police responded to a Washington Road residence for a vehicle repo.

Tuesday, June 28

A woman called police to report that a male party had exposed himself at 52 Maple Ave. The woman described the suspect as a man in his thirties. Officers searched the area, interviewed several people, but were unable to locate the suspect.

Wednesday, June 29

At about 10:30 p.m., police responded to the intersection of Federal and County roads for a car vs. motorcycle accident. According to police, a 17-year-old girl driving a car clipped the motorcycle, which was carrying two people — a male driver and a female passenger. The male driver, who was not wearing a helmet, was badly injured and remains hospitalized. The female passenger was also injured.

Police issued a summons to **William Tilley**, 24, of Riverside, for driving with a suspended or revoked license. Police stopped Mr. Tilley's vehicle for failing to yield at a stop sign.

Police responded to a vandalism at Kids Kove playground — the black net covering windows on the playground structure had been cut.

A Roadmaster blue mountain bike was found on the bike path in the area of Miles Road.

The resident told police that he had spoken with the contractor who said he would start working on June 20, which he failed to do.

When police contacted the contractor he reportedly said the deposit had been stolen. Contacted again on July 1, the contractor said he was in the process of returning the deposit.

A Spring Avenue resident told police that someone stole a 300-pound anvil from his yard.

Thursday, June 30

Police responded to a Foote Street residence for a cat bite incident.

A Vincent Paul Drive resident was bitten on her right arm by her dog.

Police charged **Phillip Shana**, 18, of 24 South Meadow Lane, with disorderly conduct after he reportedly got into fight with his mother over the location of his keys and punched some holes in the walls of their home. Police said Mr. Shana appeared to be intoxicated.

A Lincoln Avenue resident told police that she saw a man walking around her property with a flashlight at about midnight. She said once he realized she saw him he fled the scene in his white pickup truck.

A car window was damaged by a rock thrown by a landscaper's lawn mower.

A Chapin Road resident's cat was bitten by stray cat.

A man told police that he lost his prescription glasses at a County Road business where he worked. He said another employee had found the glasses and was using them, and that when he got the glasses back they were damaged.

A Barton Avenue resident told police his credit card was used four times to make fraudulent purchases on the internet, including two purchases of \$687 and \$1,005 for computer equipment.

Police responded to a house break-in on Governor Bradford Drive at about 11:45 a.m. The homeowner reportedly arrived during the break-in and saw a man run out of the home and flee the area in a 2003 black Acura. Police searched the area but could not locate the suspect.

BCWA: Councilor blasts water authority officials

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failed to attend the Tuesday workshop — or the nine members of the board of directors, but doing so would only address a secondary issue. The bigger problem, he said, was the organizational structure of the authority.

The way the Authority is built, said Mr. Brenner, has resulted in significant waste and cost the East Bay ratepayers dearly. He pointed to the audit — conducted by B&E Consulting — which detailed numerous problems with the staffing at the BCWA. The audit shows that employees are paid much more than their peers at similar water authorities; it also focused on unnecessary overtime costs that are passed down to East Bay ratepayers.

While Mr. Brenner said a big change is needed with the Authority, he also criticized the leadership for not doing a better job with its management.

"I place all of it on the leadership of the BCWA, including executive director, CFO, and I also put it on the board for not having a better understanding of how the organization was running, what the weak spots were," he said.

Should it be dissolved?

So what's next for the Bristol



Board members Allan Klepper, Lloyd Matsumoto and John McElroy (from left to right).

County Water Authority? According to Mr. Brenner, the door is open for a number of possibilities. He said dissolving the Authority and replacing it with a utilities company would require a lot of work, including legislative permission. He also said that he's not sure replacement of the top officials would offer an instant remedy.

"I don't think it's as simple as firing Pasquale DeLise or firing all the directors," said Mr. Brenner.

The Council Vice President said he believes the Barrington representatives on the board — Allan Klepper, Lloyd Matsumoto and John McElroy — are smart, competent men, but acknowledged that they are part of a board that is fail-

ing the ratepayers.

"I leave it to them (the board of directors) to say if they were snookered by executive director. ... How could they not know what was happening?" Mr. Brenner said.

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