

EDUCATION

Alan Borsuk: The kids are watching. What are they learning from adult behavior lately?

Alan J. Borsuk Special to the Journal Sentinel

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An anecdote from a suburban school board member:

He was selling fundraising raffle tickets at a high school football game. A parent came up to him and said, “Are you the guy who voted to mask our children?” The board member said yes. The parent called him several names. The board member said, “Have a nice day.” The parent called him some more names. The board member again said, “Have a nice day.” The guy left.

A student was standing nearby and said, “All that just to buy a raffle ticket?”

The board member found this amusing. Compared to some of the harsh things going on between school leaders and some community members, it seems a small matter. But it left me with two serious thoughts:

One is that it’s getting pretty hard to “have a nice day” if you’re involved in making decisions on so many difficult issues involving schools in a time of pandemic, passions, and polarization.

The other is this: The kids are watching.

The Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance is a group of school leaders, both superintendents and board members, who meet monthly to pool their knowledge of what is going on and to work together on matters of mutual interest. My colleague Charles Franklin, director of the Marquette Law School Poll, and I were invited to take part in a virtual meeting with about three dozen members several days ago.

Terri Phillips, the executive director of the group, asked members ahead of the session to share some perspective. She said leaders from 17 districts took part. What they had to say (on a no-name basis) painted a pretty stress-filled picture of what they’re seeing.

For example, the question of what their biggest challenges have been so far this school year brought answers such as these:

“Socio-emotional health of everyone, lack of staff across the board (subs, bus drivers, teachers, paraprofessionals). The wherewithal of employees to maintain this pace, along with the uptick in behaviors being demonstrated by students related to trauma before the COVID experience and due to COVID.”

“Divided stake-holder groups; staffing.”

“The intensity of the opposition to students wearing masks in the school building.”

“Angry parents, difficult meetings, with little agreement.”

One answer cited angry parents on both sides of the mask divide. The majority of answers dealt with mask-related controversy.

Many expressed concerns about their schools’ financial future, given that the revenue cap on per student spending was left unchanged in the state budget passed in June. Republican legislative leaders cited a large influx of federal pandemic money as a reason for granting no increase. But that money went heavily toward districts with many low-income students. Some of

those responding in this informal survey were from districts that were getting little federal money while facing inflation and other financial challenges.

Asked about the impact of the federal money, one answered, “Virtually none, since the bulk of the funds went to urban districts.”

“Planning for the fiscal cliff that will be faced due to absence of inflationary increases in revenue limits in the 21-23 state budget,” another listed as a major concern.

One wrote, “Funding is not aligned to the needs of children, families, staff, and school communities.”

Another wrote, “It is terrifying. Money that should be used to help students overcome the educational gaps from the past 18 months has to be diverted in part to operations. We could face an economic budget cliff like never experienced before the next school year.”

And overall? Among the answers:

“The political divide of our politicians and now our community members is having a huge negative effect on our staff and students.”

“We are being forced to rethink schools through this pandemic, yet continue to forge ahead without acknowledging that we are in the midst of a pandemic. It has impacted everyone from the standpoint of overall loss (instructional loss, family loss, job loss, housing loss, economic loss, structural loss, food scarcity, etc.). Collectively, something has got to change.”

“School leaders in Wisconsin and across the country will always provide for the safety of the children that they serve. No other profession has had their livelihoods or families threatened for educating children and staff in their respective communities. How can we get unity in the community again?”

Overall, this is not “have a nice day” reading. And we’re not even talking about the most amped up, hostile, and even dangerous situations. (Did you see the video of the Florida school board member describing how false reports had been made to authorities alleging she was abusing her child?)

There have been big and strong differences over a wide range of education issues for many decades. You can look at that positively, in that parents and educators care deeply about children, and education makes a big difference.

But you have to wonder at what point things cross over to being counterproductive and harmful. Good education takes place most successfully in a good education environment. What’s going on in so many places, including some in the Milwaukee area, is harmful to that education environment.

One of the highest-impact lessons parents – and all adults – teach their children is how to treat other people, how to handle disagreements and stresses, how to navigate life and its problems each day, how to set and pursue our priorities. And they teach all this by example, whether for better or worse. These are classic do-as-I-do matters.

From politicians and public figures, from people who appear on screens, from those who walk up to someone at a football game, and especially from those who spend hours each day with children, we are all educating children.

The kids are watching. What are they learning from us?

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