

STOPPING THE EXODUS

'Old school' teachers treasured resources

But districts are gently guiding them to the door

By David Sharos

People use the expression "old school" a lot these days. But for oldish schoolteachers like me, the phrase has nothing to do with Will Ferrell movies or throwback baseball uniforms. It's about values and principles that seem to be slipping away.

During a faculty council meeting at our Schaumburg school last year, I prefaced a suggestion by saying, "You know, when it comes to stuff like this, I'm sort of 'old school.'"

And before I could finish, the principal smiled and said, "Yes, and you know 'old school' was a pretty good school."

As classes resume following summer vacation, I'm suggesting that "old school" veteran teachers may be one of our most valuable resources in confronting our problems in education. Yet in some ways, these veteran teachers are being, if not nudged out the door, then at least guided to it.

Some people blame this exodus on the greater demands that teachers face in course work or maintaining certification. Others suggest it's the clientele—students who have become harder to control and motivate. A colleague who retired last year from a Roselle school thinks some districts prefer younger teachers who were raised on computers because they bring more technological savvy to their jobs.

These factors don't stand up, however, to another real world reason: money. Many longtime teachers reside at the top of the pay scale. They command a salary that would cover two new college graduates. So many districts eager to shed these high salaries offer financial incentives for early retirement. Simply put, it's money that some teachers can't afford to pass up.

Yes, some teachers are tired. Others are burned-out and want to choose another life, just as people in other professions do. But veterans who want a spot in the classroom should have one.

"Old school" teachers came through an educational system that produced better results, according to the tests we use to measure success. That is one solid argument for keeping them in place. There are others, too, reasons beyond teaching proficiency.

Schools are where we prepare the next generation to become contributing members of society. These youngsters will one day be charged with directing our future. More of our cultural and ethical fiber is woven in schools than ever before, so it is here where our old school insights must be shared.

New college graduates, filled with enthusiasm and bursting with knowledge, eagerly enter the teaching profession hoping students will share their passion for the subject matter. These new teachers bring their own skill sets to the job. And make no mistake: Every profession

is enhanced by new blood, new ideas and abundant energy.

But teachers today are charged with far more than the so-called basics of education, and the role of *in loco parentis* requires more life experience than most of our younger colleagues have amassed.

Helen Jacobs, the fictional principal in the movie "Mr. Holland's Opus," saw this clearly. In a scene that becomes a defining moment for her inexperienced music teacher, Jacobs says: "A teacher has two jobs: Fill young minds with knowledge, yes. But, more important, give those minds a compass so that that knowledge doesn't go to waste."

Most of us in the teaching profession were good students or we wouldn't have gone into education in the first place. We liked school, and we performed. We studied the math formulas, read the books and developed our lectures. Years of teaching much of the same material hasn't particularly enhanced our knowledge of it.

But the experienced teacher, the old school instructor, has life's compass to direct his students. For secondary school teachers, this usually means working with at least 100 adolescents a year. After three decades, that's 3,000 individuals to know, not to mention hundreds more from coaching, clubs and various sponsorships. Given that, it's reasonable to argue that most veteran teachers know far more about students than about the subjects they teach.

High school teachers spend their whole lives studying adolescents—not English or other subjects.

The Illinois Board of Higher Education says that more than 21,000 teachers retired last year, and that "replacing those retiring teachers while responding to population growth will be difficult, as Illinois is already a net exporter of teachers."

Likewise, the Teachers' Retirement System reports thousands of educators leaving the system the last three years, thanks to lower retirement costs and the extension of sick leave service credit from one year to two years.

The fallout from these factors is clear: From early retirement options offered by the state to monetary incentives tossed around by districts, many veteran teachers are enticed into taking retirement options they are otherwise hesitant to accept.

Is this the best way for schools to pare their costs?

Our educational system needs stability. Our kids still need a good compass. We already have these things—we just need to hold on to them.

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STOPPING THE VIOLENCE



Boston Herald photo by Patrick Whittemore

Mike Pelonzi helped invent this bullet-proof backpack. But is that really how we want to protect our kids?

Learning to protect

Shielding kids isn't about donning armor but about care, concern and community

By Bonnie Miller Rubin

Here's an accessory that you won't find in the back-to-school aisle, not even at Target: A bullet-proof backpack, courtesy of a couple of Boston-area inventor/dads worried about school violence.

"My Child's Pack" sells for \$175 and features a light metal plate sewn into the lining. The sellers say that it can stop 97 percent of all gunfire and that it has been tested against knives, bayonets and machetes too.

Response has gone, well, ballistic. Sales have topped 1,000 since the product was launched in mid-August, with Texas and California the hottest markets.

Co-inventor Mike Pelonzi even heard from a self-described survivor of the Columbine High School shootings.

"I see a desperate need for your product," the Colorado resident wrote. "Thanks for making the world a safer place."

But back-to-school armor should make us feel more sad than secure. It preys on paranoia, given that violent deaths at school are extremely rare and, according to national statistics, have declined since 1998.

Imagine a scenario in which Mom and Dad remind Junior, as he walks out the door: "Here's your lunch box and your milk money—and don't forget to position your knapsack for maximum coverage of vital organs."

Ring up one more example of our penchant for simplistic solutions to

complex issues.

In the aftermath of last spring's tragedy at Virginia Tech, colleges have been touting their own gadgets and gizmos, such as text-message systems capable of sending an emergency text to every student. Never mind that most professors ask students to turn off their cell phones in class.

Quick fixes may help us feel we're Doing Something, but here are the makings of a far better shield:

- A highly-alert, well-trained school staff with strong emergency plans in place.

- A mental health system that is better funded, easier to access and stigma-free.

- Laws that protect privacy, but not at the expense of public safety. (Even before gunman Seung-Hui Cho killed 31 people, Virginia Tech "did not intervene effectively," according to a university report released last week. "No one knew all the information, and no one connected the dots.")

So, as the new year gets under way, how do we keep our kids safe? By building caring school communities, where everyone is made to feel valued and people are vigilant about disturbing behavior. That includes attentiveness to bullying, especially during the middle school years when reputations congeal faster than cold gravy and today's best friend is tomorrow's bitter rival.

When "The Respect for All Project," a program that promotes inclu-

siveness, filmed a documentary on bullying, about 300 children opened up with responses that were steeped in pain. Said one 6th grader: "I just, like, I get this fire inside of me that I can't put out."

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, many experts think that diverse schools relieve social pressures, rather than exacerbate them, accommodating not just the usual athlete/cheerleader hierarchy, but the drama crowd and chess geeks as well. Meanwhile, although everyone agrees that the demand for school-based mental health professionals is growing, the pool of qualified personnel is shrinking. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends one psychologist per 1,000 students. The national ratio is closer to one per 1,653 students. When budgets tighten, these pupil services are often first on the chopping block.

So, do we wave the white flag and don the protective gear? No, instead, we do what many communities have done over the last few years and craft innovative strategies to address the threat.

This summer, U.S. Rep. Grace Napolitano (D-Calif.) introduced the Mental Health Schools Act. The measure seeks more than \$200 million in additional funding to expand services. Last year, New York passed a school-based mental health bill that represented a major victory for advocates, who began the process to meet the daunting psychological needs post-Sept. 11.

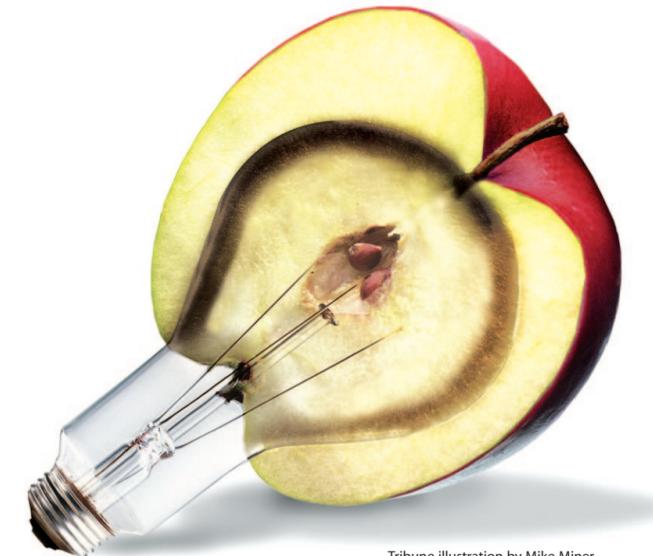
Even without legislation and funds, some districts are adopting smarter policies. To combat cyber-bullying, some educators—whose hands have been tied regarding incidents after-hours—are having families sign contracts that give administrators the right to discipline students for actions taken off-campus if it affects the school climate.

"This makes it a contractual issue, not a constitutional one," said Parry Aftab, an Internet privacy lawyer and founder of WiredSafety.org. In other words, officials don't have to defend themselves on the free speech issue; they can just say the student violated the agreement.

We know what works in school violence prevention. Certainly, a bullet-proof backpack won't hurt anyone, but as a real solution—or as any part of a meaningful national conversation—it's way off the mark.

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LOCAL DRAW



Tribune illustration by Mike Miner

HEART: Sometimes even parents play pretend

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talked, reclimbed the stairs, retucked into bed, re-kissed that soft head.

Then came Round 2. Again, feet shuffling.

This time I was not far from his room. This time the words came in whispers, barely audible whispers there at the top of the stairs.

"I'm nervous about tomorrow. I'm afraid I might vomit."

The child softens no blows.

In a word, he took me right back. Took me back to the weeks, there were two of them, one in kindergarten, one in 1st grade, when I, too, got so sick, so dehydrated, they twice tossed me in the hospital.

I remember it vividly. The little pink puppet they sent me home with. But other things too, things that weren't quite so nice. Things that still give me shudders.

I know what it is to be so afraid, so rumbly inside that you can't hear a word, and the room feels like it's swirling.

I took my boy by the hand. We had us some digging to do.

"We need a heart," I informed him. As if I knew just how to fix this. As if I were a sorcerer who held the potion.

Sometimes even parents play pretend. Because they have to. Because sitting there falling apart would not help.

The ailment that night called for a little red heart. A wee little something. Something he could slip in his pocket and know I was there. Not down the street, around the corner,

four more blocks south.

We dug through my top drawer of treasures. There was a rock shaped like a heart, a tarnished old ring, a bunny the size of a quarter. And the two red, see-through hearts.

We sifted and sorted. I let him decide. I told him how his big brother, too, used to go off in the world with me in his pocket. Explained how it worked. How you give it a squeeze and you know that I'm there. That I'm thinking. And loving. And waiting. For when he'll be home again.

I told him I, too, would carry a heart. Give it a squeeze. Send a signal. All day, back and forth, little hearts would be flying. Would be defying all

logic and sense, and even some science.

Good thing when you're 6, you know things by heart. And you believe, most of all, the things that your mama tells you. Especially at night, especially past bedtime, when all of your insides come tumbling right out.

That is the hour that's blessed. That is the hour that mamas and papas and the people who love you pull out their needles and thread, and even their little red buttons, whatever it takes to stitch you and your heart all back together.

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