

Parents' Nights, Days: Opportunity or Ordeal

When adults proudly play with Play-Doh

Now that most kids are comfortably back in school, it's time for parents to go back to school – not for graduate degrees, but for parents' nights or days. From Miami to Maine, Connecticut to California, public or private, parents are heading into their children's classrooms to meet teachers, have a few hors d'oeuvres, rub a few elbows and find out just exactly what's planned for their children this year.

Whether schools choose to welcome parents during the day or the evening, this year's teachers, deans and heads of school, plus lots of volunteers and support staff, have pulled out all the stops. Some schools, such as Riverdale Country, have their upper school parents come on a Saturday and their lower school parents on a weeknight. In both instances, parents attend an assembly to hear the head of school and/or heads of the upper and lower schools speak, and then shuffle off to their child's classroom.

Upper school parents spend a Saturday morning going through a shortened version of their child's schedule. "I got shinsplints," one sore parent commented after sprinting from class to class across the vast upper school campus. Sixth-grade parents listen to teacher presentations in the auditorium, gym or cafeteria and visit classrooms. Other lower school parents meet in their child's classroom, sit at their desks, read a note their child left for them and write one in return. Teachers make presentations, and then parents walk around the classroom, socialize and see their child's posted work, books and, of course, cubbies.

Whether your child is a preschooler or a teenager, while you're at school, you might even begin to identify with your child. "You feel like you're them," confessed the mother of a 4-year-old at the 92nd Street Y Nursery School. "In the orange room, parents played with Play-Doh." They also greeted each other and socialized, naturally. "Some people are back for the third time, and hadn't seen each other for three months," remarked the three-year veteran. "But then it was down to business," she said. The head of the school, Nancy Schulman, addressed parents; the head of the parents' association spoke; teachers made presentations; and red-room parents read last year's class' newsletter.

A mother of three – a seventh-grader at Collegiate and first- and second-graders at St. Hilda's and St. Hugh's – compared the different ways parents' night is handled at the two schools.

"Parents got the same amount of information on curriculum at both parents' nights," she says. "But, Collegiate's started at about six o'clock with hors d'oeuvres. That lasted until about 6:30 or 6:45. Parents did socialize, then they gathered in a central location where the head of the middle school gave a platitudinous 20-minute

speech, after which parents were sent off to their child's homeroom.

"At St. Hilda's, parents are greeted at the front door," the mother of three continued. "Parents come later and leave earlier. They say hi and send you right to the classrooms – there's no waste of time. It's more economically diverse, so it's run tighter."

Columbia Grammar runs its parents' night in much the same way as Collegiate. Parents are offered refreshments in the lobby, and then it's off to the classrooms. One mother of a fifth-grader recounted, "There was a great charge about what teachers are teaching this year, from the new librarian to the veteran science teacher whose been teaching for 35 years." As at most schools, the teachers assured parents that "it's about the love of learning and what their students are going to take with them at the end of the year."

Some parents remarked on the new look of today's teachers. "All these teachers look cool and hip," marveled the Columbia Grammar parent. Said a Dalton parent: "One teacher had a sex change operation over the summer. Last year 'he' was a 'she.'"

At the best public schools, parents' night is similar to those at many private schools. But at one problematic public high school on the Lower East Side, parents' night was a big disappointment. A ninth-grade teacher who teaches about 100 students revealed that only 12 parents showed up.

"The parents who came were very good," the teacher related. "We sat at tables in the cafeteria, teachers wore name tags, and parents came in, picked up their kid's programs and schedules, and talked to specific teachers who were stationed at various tables."

This particular instructor, who teaches global history, has a meet-the-parents plan he relies on each year: He introduces himself first, and then, on a prepared form, informs parents what subjects their kid is good in or needs improvement. He then gives parents a spreadsheet with their child's quiz and test scores. The bottom line, he said, is that as a result of the low parent turnout, "Now I call parents a lot."

"It makes me sad," a fellow teacher said. "Because all the parents seem to worry about whether their kids are staying out of trouble, but they don't seem to care what kind of educational setting they're in."

It's a far cry from the committed group of overarching private school parents who want to know what they're getting for their \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year. "When I ask my kids what they did in school today," said the mother of three, "I usually get a grunt or 'nothing.'" She, like the rest of us, finds parents' night or day a good opportunity to assess teachers and learn about what our children will be doing in school this year. ■

