



### **I Miss That 7:45 Bell!**

By Susan Whitmire, Public School Teacher and Guest Writer

For over 30 years, that bell has dictated my schedule, my life! I often viewed it as a foe or even an enemy. From the time my phone alarm started chiming at five and my eye lids started to open each morning, my goal was to be ready for that bell. Being ready for that bell meant being in my school room, dressed, hair and teeth brushed, lesson plans reviewed, all materials and equipment needed for lessons gathered, emails checked and sent, because after that bell there was no looking back. Ready or not, here they came!

#### **Who Quieted the Bell?**

March 13, 2020, would be the last time the bell would sound. How could we have ever known? That Friday morning was much like any other Friday. Yes, we heard staff members talk throughout the day about a virus that may threaten our school days; however, we were thinking only a few days or maybe two weeks at the most. When the 2:30 p.m. dismissal came, I gave my first graders a hug, told them I loved them and wished them a great weekend, just like every other day.

Sunday evening around four o'clock, our state governor announced schools would be closed for the next two weeks. Teachers would return to school for two days to prepare for this new type of learning. Even veterans like myself had no words of wisdom or comfort for the younger teachers. This was certainly uncharted territory for everyone. Face-to-face contact was now replaced with digital terms like eLearning, Google Meets, Zoom, and SeeSaw.

## **Living without the Bell**

My life was thrown into a tailspin. I quickly found out that the 7:45 bell was not my foe, but it was more like my compass, my foundation for the day. Those first days I found myself floundering, trying to find direction, and feeling so disconnected with my students. My colleagues were expressing the same thoughts. I felt like a first-year teacher all over again. All the years of training in classroom management and teaching through the arts seemed useless now. I was stuck at my kitchen table with a computer and phone as my teaching tools and 19 students that I could only reach virtually.

Virtual learning divided the advantaged and the disadvantaged—a situation like none other in education in this century. Yes, I know that is a strong statement, but I fully stand behind it. I witnessed it! The kids who had active parents and available technology were able to attend virtual class meetings and complete assignments. The students without these resources were left out. Left out, of course, means they were behind. When we met face-to-face during “normal” school, I could make sure those students had the extra support and technology they needed. Now it was like my hands were tied. I couldn’t get to them. I felt helpless and hopeless. I am fortunate to say I only had three, from my 19 students, who I felt were left out. But I saw those three little faces in my head and wondered what they were doing all day. Who was taking care of them? What were they thinking? What were they wondering about this new world they were experiencing? Were they scared? Even the intervention of our guidance counselors and social workers could not fix this dilemma.

Most parents, students, and teachers were hoping for a return to school sometime in April. Those hopes quickly vanished when the announcement came that school would be closed for the remainder of the year. It was like the air had been sucked out of the room. What? No Field Day, Awards Day, signing of yearbooks, hugging and saying goodbye! This just didn’t seem natural.

Before that announcement, students kept asking when we were coming back. I always answered with, “I hope it will be in a few weeks.” They wanted to get back to their life. Even though I would have a daily virtual morning meeting and read aloud with the class, I often would get calls from parents asking if I could just call and talk to their child so the child could hear my voice. One Sunday morning, while waiting for virtual church to begin, I heard a strange commotion outside. I went out my front door to find my students and parents in a parade of cars holding signs and waving at me. The flood of emotions from all the change started pouring out through tears. I could not stop crying as I went “social distancing” from car to car to see my students. Throughout April and May, I constantly received sweet messages and notes of how much school was missed. The students wanted to return to school, and I wanted to be back in school with them.

We virtually had our Awards Day and said our good-byes. As much as I tried to make it exciting, it just was not the same. Just like everything else has been different.

## **Spread Grace Not Fear**

Now decisions are being made about this school year. My students’ parents are looking to me for guidance. They know virtual learning cannot compete with face-to-face instruction. The parents experience the frustration of switching from just being parents to being the classroom teacher. Many of the parents do this while trying to work at their jobs! Many of them say they can’t balance that act

again. They are also fearful—fearful from the daily bombardment of the media and fearful that they may make a wrong decision.

As a Christian in public education, I strive to be that calming presence in this storm. That presence is like the new motto my church has adopted: “Spread Grace Not Fear.” That certainly is not an easy task. I often find myself getting a failing grade. Thank goodness His grace is sufficient. He even drops that failing grade and lets me start over! He’s the best teacher ever!

As Christian educators, this is our time to shine! May we be worthy of His call on our lives! May we, through His power, spread His grace lavishly and push back any fear and darkness.

By the way, I cannot wait until I hear the sweet sound again of that 7:45 bell! I am praying it will be much sooner than later. Either way, God is in control!

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