

# Painted into a Corner

*This parent learned to question authority when her child's principal lied to her.*

By Patricia Alspach

Too many parents are patronized or met with obfuscation when they complain about problems with their schools. If they persist in their complaints, they are eventually accused of being “against the schools.”

Before I tell you of my public school experience, let me make clear something I shouldn't have to say: I am not against public schools. I am against incompetent schools, public or private.

When I enrolled my first-born child in public school in 1987, I knew the schools had drastically changed since my five siblings and I had attended back in the 1950s and 60s. The facilities were newer, had computers, air-conditioning and carpeting. There were separate music, science, gym, cafeteria and art rooms, along with specialized teachers and noon aides for those rooms.

Instead of 40 students crammed into a small classroom, my child's class averaged 23 students in large rooms with round tables. Special learning stations were placed around the room so children could work at their own pace.

Seeing all these things, I couldn't believe my child's good fortune at being able to attend such a wonderful public school. I'd been told, “Feel free to ask questions.” So, I did.

“Why don't the children use lined paper to print the alphabet?” I asked.

The teacher's explanation had something to do with “small motor skills” (motor skills with small children? motor skills for handling small objects? the skills of small motors?) and “developmental learning.” The jargon threw me off balance and made me ashamed to admit my ignorance. Like so many other parents, I just smiled and nodded my head.

That was the beginning of my asking questions of the system. Over the next few years, I was introduced to

many concepts, such as “whole language,” “invented spelling” (*invented spelling?*), Reading Recovery,” “co-operative learning,” and “self-esteem education.”

Parents who are really listening when exposed to such terms begin to hear the first faint alarm bells — that queasy feeling in the gut that says something could be very wrong here. But they usually can't put their finger on what it is, and certainly have no idea what to do about it.

Rightly or not, I think I might even have tolerated these emphases in the curriculum and pedagogy if their use or inculcation had been secondary to the learning of basic academic skills. But such was not the case.

Too many kids couldn't read. Spelling was atrocious. When I questioned my firstborn's lack of reading, spelling, and printing ability, I was told my child just wasn't ready to read, and that all those skills would eventually appear.

I was worried, so I bought workbooks for home use. I hired tutors immersed in the school's pedagogy. A thorough pediatric exam including eyes, ears, and brain showed no physical problems.

When I confessed to other parents my worry about my child's apparent (to me, but not to the teachers) failure to learn, I found that I wasn't the only one with this problem. Friends admitted to me that their children didn't seem to be learning much either.

Still, our thinking was intimidated by the sheer authority of the public school establishment. My child wasn't learning, but what did I know? The teachers and the schools were the experts. I was just a mother, after all.

Never mind that I had lived in four countries, had a B.A. in English, and was a former insurance investigator for fraud, product liability, and medical malpractice. To them, I was just a mom.

And then one day, something happened. It was a small thing — a mom sort of thing, actually — one of those little epiphanies that make things suddenly perfectly clear.

The school used tempera paint for art projects which stains clothes permanently. My child was coming home with ruined clothes. When I complained, the teacher advised me to talk to the principal. I approached him with trepidation — who was I to bother the principal of the school with something as trivial as ruined clothes?

But I asked him: “Why doesn't the school use washable paint?” His unbelievable reply: “There is no such thing as washable paint.”

I was dumbfounded. Of course there's paint that is washable! I buy it all the time for my children. When I told him he was in error, he said, “Well, you're the only one to complain.” Later, I called friends and discovered that plenty of mothers had complained to this man and had gotten nowhere. He was lying to me.

Catching my child's school principal in this seemingly trivial lie had a profound effect on my thinking, and on my assessment of the authority of the public schools. I realized they were run by people, people who were eminently fallible, and that I had every right to question what seemed off-base to me.

It took a few years of asking questions and conducting my own independent research, but over time I discovered the value of asking questions that elicit important information. Parents must be vigilant, check all of their children's schoolwork, compare what their children are learning with what they learned at that age, and talk to other parents.

*(Adapted with permission from the Mackinac Center for Public Policy's “Michigan Education Report,” Early Fall 2002. Ms. Alspach is a writer who lives with her husband and children in Farmington Hill, Michigan.)*