

## COMMENTARY

## School days

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Vernon Peeples says that when he started school more than 70 years ago this month, he didn't actually start at school; first, he started in an operating room. So did everybody else in those halcyon days. If their parents couldn't take them (to the hospital in Bradenton), a school bus did.

Then he and his entire generation had their tonsils cut out. This was thought to be a public health service, akin to having vaccinations today.

Unlike vaccinations, however, universal tonsil removal had several added social advantages (this is my thought, not Vernon's): First, it probably silenced the little critters in the classroom, creating instant order out of youthful chaos. I'll bet those students shut up for a whole week after that.

And second, it provided a steady stream of much-needed work to doctors, who got a whopping \$5 per operation.

A good ol' Florida boy, Vernon recounted his story earlier this week on public radio's WFCU. When he got to school (he started as a first grader, circa 1936), he didn't know how to count past one, or read or write, he recalled. He finished his tale with a Lincoln-esque flourish: Vernon never missed a day of school or a minute of time, because he arrived before the bell even if he had to run.

Now that's how to kick it off — you cut

their tonsils out. Maybe cutting out their voice boxes would be taking it a little too far, or maybe not, but I'm open to the suggestion. Then you send them into a life that guarantees invasive surgeries on mind and body.

After all, it builds character. It keeps'em tough. In Vernon's case, it turns them into politicians (he served in the Florida state legislature from 1982-1996). By "It," I mean this rank-and-file American social opportunity called public school, in which most of us get to ride on a character-shaping cultural conveyor belt paid for by all of us.

What fun! And in my own case, I got to start kindergarten not once, but twice.

The first time I went almost 50 years ago, my mother walked me down the road to school, and left me at the door. Miss Adams greeted me, directed me to my table and chair, and got all the children seated. But one of them, Douglas Thompson, refused the bit — he jumped to his feet, ran to the wide-open window, and dove out. Tucking into a practiced roll, he came up on his feet at a dead run, aimed for home. Miss Adams, who was 60 if she was a day, calmly told the rest of us to sit still. Then, while we watched in thunderstruck amazement, she sprinted out of the classroom, down the hall, out the school door and down the road, like an Olympian.

Doug had a good lead, and he wasn't slow, exactly, but Miss Adams was fast. Five minutes later she was back with the collared boy, and he was crying. He cried every day for almost two weeks, I remember, and nobody had even so much as hinted at a tonsillectomy.

Something was clearly wrong with Doug, but why worry? Everything was perfect in America in 1958 (as long as you were white and middle-class). The boys had crew-cuts and the girls had pigtails, and they spent the morning being good. The whole doggone thing — kindergarten, a German word chiseled out of hard consonants that seems to goosestep toward the future — only lasted about three hours a day.

There was a rest in the middle of it, in which we lay on the tops of our tables. There was duck-and-cover practice in case the Rusks tried to bomb us (I loved to get under the table and stare at Judy Clark, with brown eyes and black hair like my mother's). And we had snacks. Nobody expected us to read a darn thing (as we said politely, then).

Now, 49 years later, I've started back to kindergarten for the second time, and it's much less light-hearted. Every day I go to Ms. Chernow's class of 18, at Alva Elementary School, with my son, Nash, to watch him get started and say goodbye. He's going for the first time, and not just mornings — it's a highly organized six-hour operation, with a barrage of calculated information fired his way that would have sunk an ordinary first grade class a half-century ago. I'm not sure what the rush is, but it's there: weekly learning goals, quickie tests, and an elaborate system of approvals or disapprovals.

All that cake and some icing, too: I didn't even have to take him to the operating room, first, to have a piece of his throat excised. They sure take it easy on kids these days, don't they? What's going to happen to their characters?

Faced with this, Nash did shed a few tiny tears the first three days (the boy has a lot of natural courage; he just turned his head to the wall and refused to ask his dad if he could leave with him. Then he got on with

it). In three weeks time he's already learned to write his full name and some numbers. He's begun to recognize words like red, orange, I, go. He's learned you don't just go up to people and hug them when you like them — which is what he does at home, where he tries to pick them up and throw them around, just to show how much he cares.

And he has also learned to follow the imperatives of the remarkable, bright, steady, unsentimental-but-kind, straight-to-the-point, somewhat demanding Ms. Chernow, and her capable wingman, Miss Taylor.

I don't know where they get these people — all the talent, the brains, and the sheer horsepower to get through a full day with children, and keep them interested. Because kindergarten has changed. Now the teachers aren't merely kindly if capable babysitters. They're teachers, and that's hard work.

From what I can see, it's still a woman's world; it's just that these women have a lot more to deal with than those women did. All the kindergarten teachers, and probably most who teach the early grades at Alva, are women. The principal is a woman, the welcoming folks behind the main desk are women, and the volunteer parents are mostly women.

What does all this mean? I don't know. But since I'm going to volunteer in the classroom occasionally, maybe I'll find out.

I do know one thing: if I had to bet on the old systems or the new one to help a troubled kid get like Doug Thompson get into a steady life, I'd bet on this one. As much as I loved Miss Adams.

She tried with Doug, but it didn't take, I guess (sure, there are a million other factors. So what?) One day when he was 14, he went home and shot himself.

I'm damned if we're going to let that happen here. ■

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