

On a Problem in the Fifth Grade (Part 3)

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This is the third, and last of a series of email exchanges between my daughter's mother and me about an issue we see in school this year. To make sense of this thought, it is best to read Parts 1 and 2 before this one. The beginning paragraphs of Part 1 will set the stage for the three interconnected thoughts:

My ten-year old daughter—I'll call her Dee in this writing—lives with her mother, Margaret here, on the west coast of the U.S. I live on the east coast. I see Dee every two or three months, and we write notes back and forth. Just notes, I'm hearing impaired and can't use a phone or hear on Skype. Margaret and I stay in touch by email.

Dee is in the fifth grade. I'll call her teacher Mrs. Johnson. It's now January and Margaret has been reporting problems for Dee in Mrs. Johnson's class. A few weeks ago, on a visit to see Dee, I observed the class and spoke with Mrs. Johnson, not to deal with the problems Dee is having with her but rather to get a sense of her teaching approach and what she is like as a person.

Last week, I received an email from Margaret about the most recent problems. Here, I'll include an excerpt from Margaret's email and the part of my reply that bears on this circumstance. You can decide what you think about my approach to this issue and how you would deal with a similar problem as a parent

So again, read Parts 1 and 2 before you read this thought. This thought is an email from Margaret to me in response to my email in Part 2. Then, my emailed response. And last, what we decided to do about the situation, at least for now.

Margaret's email:

Regarding school situation. My thinking is that we are trying to make the learning environment as supportive, positive and productive as we can for Dee in school. We aren't trying the change the way the school operates generally. They are who they are, and we can't expect that to change. We're making it

best for Dee given that reality.

I'm willing to go either way: stay in the class or transfer. It comes down to a cost-benefits analysis. We maximize the benefits and minimize the negatives. At the least, before we move Dee from where she is, we need to make sure that the alternative to Johnson's class is in fact a better environment for Dee. If it's no better, or even worse, there's no sense in moving her. Also, it's not simply a matter of whatever we decide. Dee's thoughts and preferences count too; really, more than ours, because she is going to be the one in whatever class it is, every day all day.

I called a couple of parents with kids in the two other fifth grade classes. They have reservations about what is going on in those classes. Some of their concerns are similar to the ones we have with Johnson, and some are different. I have also heard from Dee about issues she's heard about from her friends with the other two teachers. So I'm concluding that the other two teachers aren't any better than Johnson, and really, unless another class is substantially better, I'd rather keep Dee where she is.

There are also issues around the move itself. These fifth graders all know each other. We can come up with a good story to convince Dee that a move is a good idea, but her friends are going to ask her why she is going to a new class half way through the year, and that could have an adverse effect on Dee. And there is the psychological impact on Dee herself. How is she going to perceive herself if she leaves in the middle of the year like that? And if she leaves, is she missing an opportunity to learn how to manage problems that come up in life, a capability she is going to need later on in middle school and high school. It's important that we as parents don't fight Dee's battles for her, she needs to learn to look out for herself. And anyway, I'm not seeing that the other teachers are any better than the current one. So is it all worth it to have Dee switch teachers? I'm thinking no, it isn't.

I believe the meeting I had with Johnson and the counselor helped. It made Johnson aware of who Dee is, all that she is, which helped Johnson put the schoolwork in better perspective. And Johnson does seem to be trying. She brought up some things she could do to help Dee. I will continue to monitor Johnson by checking in with her every couple of weeks, so she knows we are watching. And I will continue strategically to encourage and support Dee at home, with the goal of keeping school in balance with all that

Dee is doing in her life.

So for me, keeping Dee is the best thing we can do, rather than put her in a situation which, as far as I can see, isn't any better than the one she is in, and which could involve unforeseen issues to deal with up the road. Let me know your thoughts. I haven't done anything about a move, and Dee isn't aware of your and my discussions about this.

On another matter, Dee filled out all the forms for middle schools options next year. [There are choice schools, as they are called in addition to the regular middle school, with enrollments determined by a lottery.] The lottery deadline is this Friday. Dee has her heart on [a school that has an outdoor adventure focus]. Fingers crossed.

My reply:

All you say about the Johnson situation makes sense. The only thing I would say is that there could be a time when we say to Dee: "Daddy and I love you with all our hearts and want the best for you. We understand that you don't want to do (whatever it is), but we are older and we trust our judgment. So we are going to do what we think is best for you even though you don't want to do it."

I'm not saying this applies to this Johnson situation. I think you should do what your doing. Great you are talking to the other parents. I'm highly impressed with all the details and angles you are taking into account with this. Stay grounded in the goal of keeping Dee's childhood going in the best possible direction--school is a part of that, but only a part. That old saw, the proof is in the pudding. The last time I saw Dee, she couldn't have been in better shape--physically healthy (with all we've been talking about, the most important thing, nothing close, is nutrition), developing beautifully, doing what she ought to be doing, confident, free, happy, secure. You are on the case wonderfully as a mom. There well could be something like this Johnson issue every year in school--it's just in the nature of schools and the people who work in them that there be problems.

Great with the school applications. If a school you want is no, get on a waiting list. And, like next October, just walk in the school office and ask to talk to someone. Face-to-face contact is better than phones and emails. Students drop,

there are openings. Don't take no for an answer if it is something you and Dee want. I think it is a benevolent universe. If you get it in your head that Dee is going to that middle school she wants, and it looks good to me, don't give up until her is in there.

There are no rules or procedures you absolutely have to follow. I remember a play I cast when I was directing theatre. I cast the lead. A few days later, someone I had passed over got in touch and said she really felt right for the part and she knew I cast someone else but would I be willing to interview her and have her read one more time. That's a break in protocol, but since she took the time to get in contact and obviously felt she was right for the role, I agreed to meet with her. The problem earlier was that I thought she was too young for the part and not quite worldly enough for it as written. But when I saw her the second time I saw that she was really talented and that I had been locked into a concept for that role, and that it would work even better if the central character was younger and newer to the world than it was written. So I cast her. And the play was standing room only, a huge success. This was summer theater in Vermont. They actually stuffed folding chairs in the back and on the sides of the theater to get people into the theater (the owners of the theater wanted the money), and people were still turned away. And the biggest reason for the play's success was this too-young lead who didn't take no for an answer.

Anyway, if Dee wants to go that particular school, and you want her to go there, and it looks good to me, don't give up until she is in that school.

This was a week or so ago, and the decision has been to keep Dee in the class she has been in, which, taking into account Margaret's views--she's closest to the situation day-to-day--I'm comfortable with. Today, I received an email from Margaret saying, "Dee told me her seat has been switched from the back of the room to the front. She says that Johnson has been giving her a lot of personal attention, and that things are going well in school for her."

We'll monitor the situation and see how it progresses and act accordingly.

You, the reader, can review these three email exchanges about the fifth grade issue to see what you can learn from them, and decide

what you would have done if you had been in Margaret's and my shoes.