

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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Dadline: Hoping that a regular school day can bring a sense of normalcy

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

This week, barring any last-minute, pandemic-related changes, my daughter will sit in a public school classroom for the first time in 10 months.

I am probably not as unnerved by this prospect as I should be, given the spiking rates of coronavirus in Roanoke and beyond. She is well-practiced in wearing masks, keeping clear of crowds and other protective procedures that have become daily rituals since last spring. I trust that the school system, having some experience with allowing younger children to return to school already, has plans in place to keep students safe and healthy.

But I must also confess to a gnawing sense that I have simply thrown up my hands and surrendered. “Let’s just get on with it, then,” I say, waving the white flag and giving in. Sure, COVID-19 cases and deaths are at all-time highs, but it’s time to go to school, sweetie!

Yes, my family has the option of keeping my daughter home and continuing online learning, which has not been an optimal situation, to say the least. But we’re going to let her go to school. She wants to go to school, we are placing vast amounts of trust in her to do the right thing and we hope that the schools are ready for this enormous challenge.

Other school districts that opened for in-person learning have had problems and successes along the way. It’s entirely possible that my daughter’s school could close again soon after it re-opens if there is a surge in cases.

Thanks, teachers and administrators, who will be on the front lines of teaching students while defending themselves and their classrooms against a virus.

I admit that the decision to let our daughter return to class — for just two days each week, I should mention — is being made more with the heart and a hunch than with the head. We are all starved for a crumb of normalcy. Maybe these are baby steps to that end?

Normalcy seems tantalizingly within reach, especially with the hope that a vaccine awaits, although it was disappointing, if unsurprising, to learn that available doses were far short of what the federal government had promised.

I thought back to just a year ago, when I chaperoned a group of Girl Scouts to a General Assembly session in Richmond. The girls, including my daughter, met local legislators, toured the Virginia Capitol and were recognized on the House of Delegates floor by Del. Sam Rasoul and speaker Eileen Filler-Corn.

The girls got a great lesson in watching state government at work. And they stayed in a lovely hostel in downtown Richmond where they cooked their own dinner and did the dishes.

The visit happened late during the General Assembly session, so I decided to hold off writing a column about it until the winter of 2021, to encourage families to visit the state capital. Now, such visits are impossible due to COVID-19.

Anyway, the Capitol is boarded up because of threats made by some right-wing groups following the attack on the U.S. Capitol — where I chaperoned some of the same Scouts on a trip two summers ago.

Things have changed since last winter. Maybe going back to school this week is the first step to changing everything back. One can only hope.

THE ROANOKE TIMES

SEPTEMBER 22, 2021

Dadline: Families of vaccinated students did their homework

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

As we begin another school year in the midst of rising COVID-19 cases, I'd like to thank the parents and families whose children received vaccinations.

Not only have you taken measures to protect your children from a virus that has caused 4.5 million deaths worldwide and rising, but you are also trying to slow or stop the spread of the virus in your entire community and in your children's schools. You're protecting other families, including mine.

Parents, I must say that it's obvious that you were all outstanding students back in school. Your knowledge of the following subjects is proof of that.

You clearly know your history. Vaccines have existed in various forms going back perhaps one thousand years to Chinese efforts to create inoculations against smallpox. The birth of modern vaccines dates back to 1796 when Edward Jenner developed a smallpox vaccine from cowpox. Vaccines changed the world for the better in the 20th century, as shots for polio, measles, chickenpox, mumps, tetanus, HPV and other illnesses saved lives and kept children healthy. (Even your dog gets a rabies shot these days.)

Come on, have you ever known anybody with typhoid? Diphtheria? Tetanus? Probably not, and you never will — as long as people keep getting inoculated against these scourges that sound like they belong in the pages of a ship's log from the 1700s.

You know your science. Vaccines are safe and highly effective, with minimal side effects. That doesn't mean there is zero possibility of bad effects — yes, some people have gotten sick and even died from inoculations over the decades, including coronavirus vaccines. (I know at least one person who had serious health problems that could have been related to a COVID-19 shot.) But you know that serious adverse side effects are highly unlikely.

That's because you understand math and statistics.

For example, some people have been worried about the Johnson & Johnson vaccine after it was possibly linked to blood clotting among some adults back in April. Nearly six months later, around 14 million J&J shots have been given and five people who received them have died, four from clots and one from

complications of Guillain-Barre Syndrome. So, about one death per 2.8 million J&J shots. (The rate of death or adverse effects from other COVID-19 vaccines is even lower.)

By contrast, the United States has recorded about 41 million cases of COVID-19, resulting in the deaths of more than 666,000 people, according to the website Worldometer. That's about one death per every 70 cases.

Those are pretty low odds of dying from COVID, but the virus is still a far riskier than getting a shot. Which is more likely to happen, something with odds of one in 2.8 million or something with a one in 70 chance? With that keen knowledge of probabilities, you did the right thing and got your family vaccinated.

Which means you must have aced civics in school. Merriam-Webster defines civics as “a social science dealing with the rights and duties of citizens.” Now, some people shout about their “right” not to get a shot or wear a mask or take other necessary actions that would protect their community and the vulnerable from a deadly virus, but in doing so they have truly shirked their duty as citizens.

They might also eventually violate the rights of other people if they pass along the contagion, thereby depriving them of Jefferson's “unalienable rights,” described in the Declaration of Independence as “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Hard to be happy, free and maybe even alive if some virus-denier has sickened you.

You, the civics genius that you are, understand that you have an obligation to work for society's greater good, which is why you and your kids are vaccinated.

I'll bet you were a wiz in business and economics, too. You know that until the virus is eradicated or at least curtailed through robust community-wide vaccinations, many people will never eat in a restaurant, go to the movies, shop in local stores or go out to support small businesses. With COVID-19 cases rising dramatically in Southwest Virginia, many local business owners fear another serious downturn in the economy. You are helping keep those businesses afloat by getting vaccinated.

You clearly enjoyed extracurricular activities back in the day, such as sports and clubs. You don't want to see your kids' high schools forfeit football games, postpone band concerts, scrap theater productions, nix science fairs, cancel school trips or deep-six any club activities that make school fun and bearable for many students. The only way these events can happen is if children are healthy and safe, and not stuck at home in front of a laptop, trying to conjugate French verbs or balance chemistry equations through Microsoft Teams.

Right now, in mid-September 2021, it is already obvious that many school divisions will not get through this school year unscathed. If your children are vaccinated, it is far less likely that they (or you) will get sick from the disease, which is the most important thing. The likelihood of schools staying open, games being played, proms being held and graduation ceremonies commencing is greater if a high percentage of people get shots.

Because you were such a fine student in school, you did your research, weighed the consequences and got your families vaccinated. The Yale School of Medicine has an excellent comparison of vaccines on its website at bit.ly/3nc0RzU.

Parents, you aced the vaccines curriculum. We'll see if your peers can measure up.

THE ROANOKE TIMES
NOVEMBER 7, 2021

Dadline: Techie teen comes in handy for old dad (sometimes)

By Ralph Berrier Jr.

I have been taking some college courses recently, which has involved learning loads of new technology platforms and stretching my old-man brain to the point where I wake up in the morning with sore synapses. All these new tech tools also produced a stunning revelation for me:

Sometimes it's great to have a teenager in the house.

That sentence has never appeared anywhere in the history of human written communication. I'm not kidding. In fact, I Googled it. I put the words "sometimes it's great to have a teenager in the house" into quotes, plugged them into the search engine and got back "No results found."

(In fairness to teens everywhere, I also Googled "husbands are great to have around the house" and got no results, either.)

Anyway, some parents grudgingly accept this fact about teenagers, even if we don't admit it (or write it down, apparently). We are raising a fully computer-trained generation of children — "digital natives" is the oft-used phrase, which I guess makes me a "digital colonial imperialist" whenever I take away my daughter's phone.

The phone! Holy cats, do kids love their phones. They take pictures, post pictures, "heart" their friends' pictures, make videos, post videos, "heart" their friends' videos, insta-snap-text their buddies and do everything else on their phones except actually talk. The only people more obsessed with teenagers' phones than the kids themselves are the parents, who gab incessantly about their children's phones with other parents.

"Does your kid have a phone?"

"How old was he when he got a phone?"

"Do you have rules for the phone?"

"Does she take the phone in her room with her at night?"

"How much do you pay for your phone plan?"

"These phones are so unhealthy for kids!"

"Sorry, I was reading a text just now. What were you saying? Oh right. Phones are bad."

"Ack! My phone battery is almost dead!"

"Do you have a charger?"

Hanging out with our friends used to be fun. Now, when we get together, all we do is talk about phones. That is, when we're not on our phones because we are bored hanging out with our friends.

Look, grown-ups are as addicted to phones as children are. We know this. We often do not model good behavior when it comes to cellphone usage. (Using the word "model" as a verb is something my college classes have taught me to do.)

And, like I said, parents do appreciate their children's seemingly genetic predispositions for mastering technology. That's especially true when we can't get the Wi-Fi to work or when our phones glitch. It's handy to have a teenager sitting nearby, usually wrapped in a blanket and staring down at their phone, that we can toss our phone to and say things like "Can you get the DraftKings app back for me? I deleted it somehow."

Of course, while fulfilling your fatherly request, the child is downloading all your credit card information and passwords, draining your savings accounts and defacing your profile photos, but isn't that really a small price to pay for the convenience of checking Rudy Gobert's rebound numbers and making roster moves without leaving your Dad Recliner?

But back to my own personal revelation. Because my college courses are all online and use the same educational platforms that my daughter had to learn when schools went all-virtual, my child has been a terrific resource for this old man.

When I had to set up an online quiz for a class, I tried it out with my daughter, who tested the link by taking the quiz on her phone. When I created a presentation that required interactive links, she checked all the hyperlinks and addresses. When I needed a section of an online textbook copied and printed, she helped me out — although the printer still randomly spits out pages of that book every few days even though that assignment was completed weeks ago. Kid needs to fix that printer.

Yes, in addition to washing dishes, taking out the trash and running upstairs to get my reading glasses because I am too old and lazy to climb a flight of stairs when I don't have to, my kid comes in handy when I need emergency tech help, which is frequent.

Sometimes it's great to have a teenager in the house. There, that's the second time that sentence has appeared in this column, not to mention in the history of the world.