

**HORACE MANN PARENTS ASSOCIATION
UPPER/MIDDLE DIVISIONS
OCTOBER 25, 2002 Meeting
MINUTES**

The attendance at the meeting was overwhelming. Approximately 100 people attended. The names listed were only those who managed to sign the attendance sheet.

Attendees: Pam Stuchin, Judy Balsam, Janis Yoss, Wendy Reiter, Wendy Siegel, Gina Levine, Marilyn Druck, KC Delfino, Karen Kasner, Susan Scott, Gretchen Price, Tia Powell, Sandi Burrows, Michael Burrows, Janet Vitale, Fran Awersaleh, Nassrib Zahedi, Jayne Janis, Dana Levy Riback, Janis Heller, Rita Matthews, Wendy Jacobs, Saree Ptak, Evamarie Gaviotis Whitestone, Sunghee Ha, Young Soo Choi, Catherine Woodard, Beth Hildick Smith, Adline Warrick Thompson, Benita Goldstein, Marjorie Kuhn, Cindy Sheinfeld, Lynn Koch, Mindy Heyer, Barbara Weinstein, Marilyn Tabak, Jodi Nass, Nancy Haber, Liz Pimental, Peggy Hartman, Larry Weiss, Daniel Rothstein, Ilene Rothschild, Jenny McFeely, Ellen Dawidowicz, Mindy Fleder, Jill Sirulnik, Dorothy Bandier, Carin Boris, Jeremy Leeds

Meeting began with Pam Stuchin, the Chair of the Upper Division Parents Association, who supplied us with handouts including an agenda for the meeting and the theatre schedule. Pam introduced Marjorie Kuhn, the President of the Parents Association, who gave us a little introduction about the Horace Mann website. Marjorie encouraged parents to check out the website for tickets to the January 17th Rolling Stones concert which will be raffled off on the HM website. She also asked for parent volunteers to help with programming. As the HM website is becoming the focus for where parents will get information, the message from Marjorie is that parents should visit the Horace Mann website as much as possible and familiarize themselves with the links on the right side of the Home Page.

Mindy Heyer, Chair of the Middle Division Parents Association, gave us some news on what is going on in the Middle Division. Jill Sirulnick and Nancy Haber, the Eighth Grade Parents Reps, are looking for volunteers to video 8th grade school activities that can be used for the Middle Memories video. Mindy got parents enthusiastic about Middle Mania, which will take place on November 15, 2002 at 11am. Middle Mania, a "Spirit Day," will include intramural sports for Middle Division students. Lunch will be provided. This year the event is student generated. A bake and pizza sale, to raise money for the event, will be organized by 7th graders, 6th graders will be putting up posters and handing out flyers, and 8th graders will sell raffles for prizes.

Pam informed us that the Book Fair, will take place March 4-6, 2003. She asked parents to donate used books and supplied parents with a list of places to drop off books.

Manhattan-East Side – Judy Balsam, 399 E.72nd St.
Manhattan-West Side – Paula Mauro, 201 W. 85th St.
Riverdale - Martha Kosyk,
Westchester- Teri Babus, New Rochelle
New Jersey- Marianne Scheidt, Fort Lee
Susan Shaw, Cresskill
Youngsoo Choi, Leonia

Books will sell for between \$.50 and \$1.00, and can be bought by students, parents and teachers. Proceeds usually go to support the library, but this year, the money collected may be earmarked for the Student Assistance Program. All books not sold will be donated to other schools. Pam introduced Lynn Koch, Vice Chair of PA Upper Division, and Judy Balsam, Secretary of Middle /Upper Division PA.

Susan Scott, Volunteer Coordinator for the computer lab informed us that the computer lab is open daily from 3:30pm-5:30pm, and needs parent volunteers to keep it open on a daily basis. Olivia Koppe-Levy, Volunteer Coordinator for the library asked for volunteers to work in the library after school.

Pam introduced our guest speakers: Dr. Jeremy Leeds, and Ms. Wendy Reiter. Ms. Reiter began by describing her background. She is a parent of two children who graduated from Horace Mann, and so she feels she is in a position to empathize with parents at the school. In addition, being on the faculty gives her another perspective on the “Life of the Mind” of our children. Ms. Reiter explained the work and role of Guidance and Counseling in the Middle Division. She stated that these are years of developmental transition, and she expressed her strong desire to help parents and children get through this period. She reported that many times she helps parents with the issue of transition more than the students. Ms. Reiter sees this time as a “shift” in the parent – child relationship, and expressed her comfort and confidence in the way the Guidance department at Horace Mann handles this transition. The Guidance department, at Horace Mann, takes a developmental approach, which is proactive, rather than a crisis intervention approach, which is the approach that was probably taken when parents were in high school.

Crisis intervention is only a small part of what the Guidance department in the Middle Division does. Over the three years students are in the Middle Division, the Guidance department helps students gain the skills to become more autonomous, not only academically, but also to become better people. This is a very difficult period of time, both socially and emotionally. Students are shifting more towards their peers and away from their parents. The most important skills they can learn during this time is learning how to be effective with their peers; feeling connected to a group, and comfortable in a group, not as parents may think, to learn academic skills. We have to ask, “Are these students happy?” This period of time can be characterized as “Relationships, Relationships, and Relationships.” Academic achievement is further down the list, even though this may run counter to what parents think. Parents have an opportunity to be part of this success building. She also reiterated that the degree that parents play out issues, or deciding what is important will have an impact later on. Parents and the school play roles in helping students develop successfully.

Ms. Reiter introduced us to the work of Dr. Debra Phillips’ *End Teen Cruelty Program*. This program helps kids develop healthy relationships. It teaches kids to interact in kind and considerate ways. The change does not happen overnight, but Ms. Reiter believes that if we continue to forge ahead with programs such as these we have a real shot at getting our kids to have more successful lives. Ms. Reiter informed us that Student Mentors, who are Upper Division students at HM and who have gone through the End Teen Cruelty Program, help Middle Division students learn how to cope with their peers. The program encourages older students to interface with younger students and is essential, since older students are important role models for younger students, even more important than parents are. In order to improve and change the culture at HM, it is vital that older students work closely with younger ones.

The Middle Division also has a Life Skills program in 6th and 7th grade that will be extended to 8th grade. These programs help students develop competency, so they will know how to handle difficult situations. Guidance in the Middle Division is very different, than in the Upper Division. There is more involvement with students, and more nurturing. There is an active dialogue between parents, teachers, and students, and the Guidance department works to help makes things less stressful for parents. Ms. Reiter then recommended some books for parents.

A Mind at a Time, by Mel Levine. Mel Levine is a pediatrician, and professor of pediatrics at University of North Carolina. He has a keen interest in how kids learn, and his knowledge is applicable to all of us. His book is full of anecdotes and funny stories about kids ages 6 to 17. He speaks at Mount Sinai, and has spoken to Horace Mann parents at Parents in Action meetings. Dr. Levine's next speaking engagement at HM can be found on the Horace Mann web site, as reported by Marjorie Kuhn.

Best Friends Worst Enemies, by Michael Thompson. This is a book about kids' relationships with friends. It answers the question, "When to intervene and when not to intervene?"

How to Give Your Child a Great Self Image, by Debra Phillips

Raising Emotionally Intelligent Teenagers, by Maurice J. Elias and Steven E. Tobias.

Marjorie again encouraged us to surf the HM website, since books can be purchased through the Horace Mann website link to AMAZON.COM. Donations from online merchants go to benefit the Horace Mann Parents Association.

Ms. Reiter then introduced Dr. Jeremy Leeds, Director of Guidance. He introduced us to his colleagues, in the Guidance and Counseling department at the Horace Mann Upper Division.

Jenny McFeely – Coordinator and advisor to Peer Leadership program
Ilene Rothschild – Learning Specialist and coordinator of "Letting Go" a night for parents and college bound students
Peggy Hartman – head of the Health program at HM
Daniel Rothstein – Psychologist
Doreen McDonald not in attendance

As Ms. Reiter did, Dr. Leeds questioned the notion of breaking away. According to Dr. Leeds, we as parents have not and will not really break away. Instead of breaking away, it is rather our expectations that change, and we as parents are in charge of that change. It is important that parents pay attention to the context in which things occur. While our kids may exhibit certain negative behaviors at home, these are quite different from behaviors displayed at school.

If Dr. Leeds says to a student "I met your parents and they are really nice."

A student may respond with something like, "Well that is not how they are at home."

Everything can be different depending on the context, and as parents it is important that we pay attention to the different contexts. Dr. Leeds spoke about the fact that teens feel confident in some contexts while not in others. Horace Mann tries to provide a context where our kids can do their best. The school tries to arm students with a context where they can be successful. Both parent and child play roles that change depending on the different contexts.

According to Dr. Leeds, his job at Horace Mann is to determine what roles and contexts we are providing. All learning is based on relationships. When we think back and try to remember our experiences in high school we may remember a teacher that influenced us, or maybe a traumatic event. We do not remember a math problem we solved.

Dr. Leeds then referred to his handouts, and slide presentation.

SLIDE I

What are the elements of the stance of an adult/educator?

He began by reiterating that kids may express that they want us to break away. They might really believe that that is what they want, but that is not really what is. We need to step back and ask ourselves, “Where do we go from here?”

SLIDE II

Fairbairn’s Conception of Development

? Mature Dependence

? Does this fit with or contradict autonomy?

? Why does dependence have such bad press?

Dr. Leeds emphasized the importance of developing a “mature dependence”. He said that he does not want do away with dependence but rather to encourage parents and students to develop a mature dependence. While autonomy is important, one is never really on one’s own. One is born on his own, or takes a test on his own, but that is it. He says dependence has bad press because when we think of dependence we are really thinking of over dependence. We are not ready to give up on dependence.

SLIDE III

Zone of Proximal Development

?Distance between the “actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving” and the higher level of “potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.”

Vygotsky, Mind in Society (from Wertsch, 1985)

Dr. Leeds explained that with the right kind of adult assistance, a subject will perform better on a test. Kids feel very alone when they are asked to do things in isolation. This type of assistance should not be confused with cheating, but rather as collaborative learning.

SLIDE IV

Flow
(Csikszentmihalyi)

?... “the spontaneous, effortless experience you achieve when you have a close match between a high level of challenge and the skills you need to meet the challenge. Flow happens when a person is completely involved in the task...”

- (in Scherer, 2002)

SLIDE V

Work+ Play

?But the best situation is when a person sees a life activity as both work and play. Unfortunately only about 10 percent of the time do students report this experience. Some kids never report that they have this experience.

- Csikszentmihalyi, in Scherer (2002)

This is what education is all about. Work and play coming together - doing something that is important and enjoyable. Kids become completely immersed in something if they perceive something that is work and play at the same time. There have been students who report that they solve math problems as a means of alleviating stress. The message from Dr. Leeds is that at HM the staff is trying to teach kids how learning will make them happy and while achieving those goals requires hard work, ultimately the student will discover that he is happiest at work. What can parents do to make this happen?

SLIDE VI

Collaborative Relationships

? Not “if” but “how” and “how well”

? Involving Students, parents, teachers

? Different at different ages

We should not ask ourselves if we should have a collaborative relationship with our kids, but rather how to accomplish this collaborative relationship. This collaboration involves students, parents, and teachers, and changes with different ages. It is them together with us, not just their world but ours also.

SLIDE VII

Educational values/understanding

?Belief that you have something to offer

?Belief in the ability of all to learn: our version of “unconditional positive regard”

Good education does not give up on anyone. Everyone has the ability to learn. At Horace Mann the attitude should be one of “unconditional positive regard.” Even if a student gets a failing grade, a teacher should still love that student.

SLIDE VIII

Technical Skills

?Don't take it personally.

? Ability to differentiate between the content and process aspects of your message

?Attention to the “words” and the “music” of your message

? Ability to delay judgment: or “I'm not sure. Let me think about it.”

? Judgment as to the levels of detachment or commitment to maintain

*? Judgment as to how to use your initial emotional and intellectual reaction
(or, an ability “to take a step back”)*

Parents, teachers and counselors are in a role. Parents should realize that while their children may act in ways they find objectionable, it is not personal. Parents need to ask themselves the question, “What is the best way to handle a situation? While kids may want to tell us about their day, parents need to know when is a good time to ask. Attention to the “words” and the “music” of your message is similar to the concept of “content” and “process.” As Dr. Leeds explained, if we have our children's best interests in mind, we can say a lot to them. If we show our kids that we care, we can say things to them without upsetting them. We also have to be prepared that everything does not need to have an immediate answer. In answer to the question, how much should parents be involved, versus when we should let them fight their own battles? The answer is that there is no formula. As adults we must realize that we will make mistakes with our children, but there will always be another time to do it better.

Personal values and understandings:

?Self-evaluation and self-forgiveness(see: Belief you have something to offer; internal working alliance)”

?Understanding of your particular self-in-role: as educator, professional, worker, person in relationships, individual.

? Ability to defer to a more successful context, and to collaborate with those participants.

We need to look at what we have done and where we can make a difference. We must recognize our mistakes. There are times when parents should leave the well being of our children up to the educators and there are times the educators should leave the well being of our children with up to the parents.

After Dr. Leeds presentation, there were questions from the audience.

Questions:

1. How are new teachers trained to deal with the behavior of students in the Upper Division?

The school's psychologists view the dynamics of the relationship between teachers and students in the classroom. Systems are in place to support new teachers. Elizabeth Sperling is the mentor for new teachers. Ms. Reiter provides strategies for new teachers and teachers get feedback in grade wide meetings.

2. Why is it that teachers and counselors report one thing to parents about their children and children tell parents that what is said is not really what is, but rather what the school wants the parents to believe?

Teaching is a hard job, and students may not be paying attention to all that the teachers are doing. Also we may not be getting the right context when students report back to parents about what is really going on. At a recent meeting at the Educational Record Bureau, Dr. Leeds felt the talks centered around all the things the schools are doing wrong, instead of what they are doing right. HM is trying to make their mark on education in a positive way. It is difficult because kids feel the pressure that when they get to ninth grade it counts. "Counts for what?" Dr Leeds asks. Is this a burden, or can it be exciting as anew stage toward adulthood? Kids seem to carry around the pressure and burden that they must be successful at everything.

3. Why is that no one at HM tells parents anything about our kids and what they are doing except for their grades?

To respond, Dr. Leeds explained that the reporting of news about a student is complicated, because many parents are not interested in hearing compliments about their kids. Another issue is that kids are always telling guidance people not to tell their parents and the school is torn between confidentiality and communicating with parents. The Guidance department feels pressure as to whether they should report to parents, but the department does feel that parents do have a right to be told. Dr Leeds feels that there needs to be new ways to make contact happen between the school and parents.

Larry Weiss added that a student's advisor will respond to requests for information about a student by parents. Should a parent have to ask, or should advisors just tell parents what is going on? Relationships are a partnership and there shouldn't be any vulnerability related to calling a teacher or an advisor. If not satisfied, the parent should go to the next level. Teachers and advisors want to answer questions from parents.

4. What happens if a student writes something sad? Will parents be told if there is a problem?

If a parent is worried about a child, that parent should call someone at the school. Teachers do ask Guidance for help when they are concerned about a student. The conflict arises because the faculty and the guidance department feel that they want HM to be a fertile place for students to express themselves. If the administration gets in the way of that freedom, the student will feel shut down in expressing himself or herself. On the other hand, just because kids get angry when we interfere, doesn't mean it is wrong to interfere or get involved.

In closing, Pam recommended we take a look at the Horace Mann Family Handbook. Take what is said in the handbook and use the handbook as a guide. The school and the faculty welcomes a dialogue with parents, and parents should reach out to them if needed.

