

First Year on the Big Yellow Bus

Our daughters went off to school for the first time Tuesday morning. Laura drove Juniper to school, because there was no bus for her class, that first day. Amanda caught the bus at 7:05. I walked up with her to be sure she made connections. Amanda and I hugged each other, and she scrambled onto the bus and sat in the front seat. The driver shut the door, and the bus roared away.

I felt regret at letting go, some fear, will she be all right, out there in the world on her own? I'm sure she'll be all right. She's fourteen. Juniper is sixteen.

Until now, they've been home-schooled. This year, they decided to try public school. They go down the mountain forty-five miles, to Poudre High School.

The first day was for orientation of the students. Juniper said, "A thousand people; way too many for me to deal with. I hated it. Everybody was in cliques, screaming and swearing."

The second day, they caught the bus at 6:15 and got home at 4:30. Amanda had not understood the assignment in World History. She couldn't finish it in class, and she brought it home. I saw the problem had two parts. The assignment was in modern-day complexese, in which "your everyday life" is substituted for "you," and unnecessary words are thrown in for style, like "currently," when the sentence is in present tense. Amanda and I had a lesson in penetrating complexese to find the simple meaning.

The second part of the problem was that a realistic response to the question would have been, "Can I bring you two hundred pages of answer in a few weeks?"

I said, "You have to look at how much space and time he allows for an answer and figure he wants a brief, general answer. Write the first thing that comes to mind. When you get this paper back, it will give you some further idea of what he's looking for. You need to respond to what the teacher wants more than to what is the answer to the question." I didn't like telling her that, but to keep up

with the class, she needs to learn, give a correct answer, but don't aim for depth.

After dinner, Juniper sat at the kitchen table with her algebra book open, and she soon bogged down. "There are too many problems," she said. There was all of outdoors and still some sunshine left to the day.

I said, "Speed through it. Don't think about anything else. Show your work." I worked a problem and had her follow me through. I handed her more and more of each problem until, for the last few, I walked away and said, "I'm here if you need help with the rest of them." She didn't. Later, she found out she hadn't heard the part of the instructions that said, do only every other problem.

Juniper and Amanda were used to one teacher with two students. Any confusion could be cleared, because the teacher was available all the time. Assignments were infinitely flexible, because the two students set the pace. It didn't take them long to adjust to being in classes of about thirty students, where the schedule doesn't bend much.

Juniper and Amanda dress according to their own tastes, without regard for style. Several days, after arriving home, Amanda went through moments of fury at teasing she had been subjected to, primarily about how she dresses. Juniper stoically bore the teasing she received for several weeks, but eventually she said she felt like punching some of the students.

The teasing seems to have abated somewhat. Amanda and Juniper have had more practice at either taking it or dealing with it. Amanda received help from counselors and students, and she moved to a different locker to be away from some of the worst teasing. Juniper introduced herself to the students who had uncomplimentary comments, and that defused their unfriendliness.

We have encouraged them to stick with school if that is their goal, but, when they had difficulties, we have also reminded them they could give notice and return to home schooling.

Their home schooling never took more than two hours a day. After lessons, they had the rest of their day to explore the outdoors, to pursue their own creative projects, to read whatever they wanted

to read. That it was successful is testified to by the fact that, at midterm, their public school grades average above 3.5.

Juniper said, "I can learn more with home schooling, but I also have to have a social education." We pursued that subject and concluded the public schools do not take care of social education. The high school hasn't even one class in communicating, in learning how to get along with each other, in learning how to help one another.

Social education is coincidental, handled by the students, whenever they have time and opportunity, without adult guidance, according to whatever rules the students find appropriate.

"How about a class about teasing, its origins, functions, and effects?" We agreed it would work well if two or three classes a day were devoted to social education. If the need for learning to socialize and for socializing were taken care of in classes devoted to that, the students in British Literature would be able to quiet down, leave the social life for fifty-five minutes, and concentrate on the subject under study.

Juniper said, "The system is rather inane, but you can learn if you're interested enough. My friends are good people who in some way 'buck the system,' a phrase teachers hate."

Though it is less than ideal, Juniper and Amanda stick with school. They develop friendships. Juniper enjoys orchestra and team sports. Amanda likes choir. They could not have these group experiences at home. They also like their other classes, and they find the group experience and grades interesting and challenging.

Here at home, there have also been adjustments to make. Our time together has been greatly reduced. Several days into the semester, Laura suffered a time of grief. I comforted her as best I could, but it seemed to me to be an odd reaction. After all, we still see our daughters every day, and we have more time together than many families do.

When it became clear Amanda and Juniper would stick with school, I found myself nearly overwhelmed by regret. I hadn't really thought their involvement with public school would last. I apologized to Laura for taking her earlier emotional reaction lightly.

She was not more subject to emotional upset than I was. She just saw the handwriting on the wall sooner than I did.

But we have adjusted. Perhaps I regret the loss of their free time more than they do. I am concerned because they haven't had much time for their own creative projects since the first day of school, but they have boxes full of stories, novels, poems, songs, drawings, and paintings. What they have created is not lost, and what they learned while doing it is part of them, as what they are doing now becomes a part of them, giving them wider experience, leading them further toward what they seek from education.