

# Ed Notes for October 2011

A number of parents have requested the text from my Open House talk, so here it is! (with a few omissions and minor edits).

Good evening and welcome to the Merriam School Open House. My name is Ed Kaufman and this is now my 17<sup>th</sup> year at Merriam and fourth as our principal. I am honored to work for and with the wonderful children, staff, and parents of this school community.

Community is truly at the center of who we are at Merriam. All that we do is founded on the principle that when people feel safe, comfortable, and nourished by a community, they are capable of incredible things. So, let's start by helping the new members of our community feel welcome. If you and your family are new to Merriam this year, please stand up. Let's give them a warm round of applause.

Next, similar to last year, we are going to do something else that acknowledges our focus on community. Please take a moment to introduce yourself to someone sitting near you who you don't know, and just chat for two minutes about your hopes for your children this year. Risk-taking is one of our core values at Merriam, and I hope that all of us will take the risk during the year to reach out to people we do not know, to help ourselves or others feel more a part of our very caring community.

It is an honor to work with the terrific talented colleagues seated behind me. These people give of themselves in countless ways for your children; they do their work as educators with good humor, intelligence, and compassion. They are the living, breathing definition of the word dedication.

Before I share some more serious thoughts with you all tonight, I want to tell you a few stories, anecdotes from the first couple weeks from school. I've started a tradition on Open House evening, telling you stories about how some of your children have said precious things to me at the beginning of the year. So I'll begin with two short stories here.

On the first day of school I visited all of the classes to welcome all of the children back to school. As I was chatting with the first graders in one class, one of the boys said, "I'm very glad to see you, Ed. Do you want to know why?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Because I forgot to give you something last year." In my mind I was thinking, "Is this a joke?" Or perhaps there was some special object or souvenir that this youngster had meant to give me the year before. My curiosity got the better of me and I responded, "Really, what did you forget to give me?" His simple response made me smile. He said, "A compliment."

Kids have a way of noticing all kinds of details – things I might never notice. They'll comment on things on the walls in the school, or on new students they've noticed in the building, and of course, on what others in school are wearing. Students will often take note of the animals on my tie, or whether I just had a haircut. It was one of the first days of school and a second grade girl approached me in the hallway. I was waiting for a comment about my tie, but instead she asked, "Is that an earring?"

She was pointing to my left ear. “Yes, it is,” I responded. “Are principals allowed to wear earrings?” was her follow-up question. I secretly wondered whether she really meant to ask, “Are male principals permitted to wear earrings?” I told her that indeed principals could wear earrings and then I told her the story of how I’d accompanied my older daughter to get her ears pierced for her seventh birthday. She became very nervous at the last second and said that she’d feel much better about the whole thing if I’d get one of my ears pierced as well. And the rest is history! My second grade friend smiled and proudly showed me her beautiful earrings. I’ve been told I should begin to write a book that’s a collection of these “first week of school” stories. If any of you are publishers, please see me later....

For the more serious part of my talk this evening, I’m actually going to continue with some storytelling – beginning with a couple of my experiences in school. Though I’m fifty-five years old now, I remember much of my elementary school experience as if it were yesterday. I was an extremely shy youngster and when my family moved from one suburb of NYC to another in between my first and second grade years, I was terrified about what to expect. A week before school started, I met my new teacher, Mrs. Frye, who smiled, put her hand on my shoulder, and told me that everything was going to be alright. After school started, she checked in with me often and always gave me a big smile. She matched me up with a buddy named Charlie – who wound up being one of my closest elementary school friends (in fact, Charlie and I reminisced about second grade at our last high school reunion). I still cannot thank this teacher enough for helping me ease my way into a new school.

In my fifth grade class, my teacher, Ms. D’Ambrosio, asked us to work in groups (similar to how we now do at Merriam). Being as shy as I was, working in groups was scary and unfamiliar territory. And yet in my fifth grade year I learned, with the guidance of a wonderful teacher, perhaps the most important skills that shaped my professional directions as an adult. I began to learn how wonderful, challenging, and complex it is to work closely with others. And this still fascinates me to this day...

After thinking about the differences that various teachers made in my life, I decided to ask our faculty for some of their stories. Here are three, in our educators’ own words:

My favorite teacher was Mrs. Cooke (4th grade). I remember her as always smiling. She seemed genuinely happy to see us. She treated everyone in our class the same and made us all feel special. She was very soft spoken, but you knew when she was disappointed.

June Schutzberger, my sixth grade teacher, was captivating. Her approach to curriculum was unusual in the Albuquerque public schools at that time: in her classroom, math, science, social studies, reading, art, and music all related to a thematic unit. When we studied Russia, Ms. Schutzberger, a world traveler, taught us to dance the troika. We learned Russian vocabulary, we did crafts based on Russian folk art, and we discussed artifacts she had collected on her journeys. We read Russian folk tales and cooked dishes from different regions which we brought in for the class to share. Our teacher's enthusiasm for her subject matter was absolutely contagious, and we found ourselves bragging to the other sixth graders

about what we "got" to do in our classroom. The new experiences, as well as our adventurous mentor, proved to be unforgettable. In her classroom, I learned to love learning!

The school system I went to for K-12 was low income and underperforming. We were painfully aware of the fact that we were seen as "less" than the students from surrounding towns. Although we did have some amazing teachers, many were bitter and unsupportive, and I unfortunately had many of them. By the time I was in eighth grade, I was convinced I was not cut out for the academic world, and was not expected to succeed or make much of myself by any of my teachers. That year I had an amazing English teacher, Ms. Abare. She supported and believed in all of us, but I couldn't help but feel that she thought I was special. She told me what a talented writer and thinker I was, and convinced me I had an academic future. I poured my heart out to her in free-writes, and she responded with emotion and honesty. I kept many of these written interactions. This summer, I found one of them. In response to my fears about the future, and my worry that I would never escape the town I was in, never go to college, never see the world, she assured me I was headed for great things, and that she knew I would achieve my goals. I think of her often, not only because she helped me get to where I am today, but because I see her as a model for helping my students feel as supported and loved as she made me feel.

There are many more of these stories – each of us in this room probably have at least one story of a teacher who made a huge difference in our lives. The job that the folks behind me do with your children – guiding them, inspiring them, connecting with them, and believing in them – will create memories for your kids that will last a lifetime. My hope is that the coming year creates many more of those stories.