



RITE OF PASSAGE

By Wilson McCaskill

For students completing primary school this year an important ritual will mark the end of this phase of their educational journey. Schools go to considerable effort to make this event a memorable and photo worthy experience. Some will prelude the event with dinners, replete with speeches, humorous anecdotes, awards and gifts. Others will wait until the big night and place the parents of leaving students in special reserved seating to watch a show that has taken much effort, energy and creativity to produce and will hopefully be remembered long after the lights go down.

The nights are invariably a mix of laughter, poignancy, nostalgia, hopefulness and appreciation. Few people would dismiss the importance of the night and everyone associated with it willingly makes an effort to make it something out of the ordinary, something that effectively acknowledges the journey travelled, the obstacles overcome, the friendships formed, the inspirations, hope and promise of those whose turn it is to move onwards and upwards.

I believe that the most important part of the ritual is acknowledging, in a significant way, each child's journey through primary school. What better way to do this than for each child to move along a line of teachers that represents that journey? By shaking every teacher's hand, sharing a smile, a meaningful look, a supportive comment or indeed a humorous remark, students retrace a significant and meaningful period in their lives.

To move from their pre-primary to their final year teacher recognising all who have been a part of their development tells students something of the investment made by so many in preparing them for fruitful adolescence and fulfilling adulthood.

It will also remind them of the highs and lows of that journey, the years they loved and the years they didn't, the teachers that inspired them and the ones that did not. But above all, it will remind them of the part they played in their own preparation to move on.

Some will walk the line and reach the end feeling confident and ready for the next step. Others will sense their own nervousness about the years to come and others will reach the end and wish they could return to the beginning.

Whatever the reaction it will be significant and memorable. Does it matter if they didn't start at the school in pre-primary or that the teachers of earlier years are no longer at the school? No, it doesn't. The line of teachers is symbolic and representative as well as real.

And what a powerful visual statement it makes for the audience. They too are reminded of the journey each child has taken. I imagine it will trigger memories of their own journey and perhaps a tingle of appreciation for teachers entrusted with the task of preparing children to live and learn well.



I know of some schools that use this “leavers’ journey” as the centrepiece of the event and they all talk of its rewarding impact on the entire school community.

POINTING THE SPOTLIGHT

Care does need to be taken in how the “leavers’ journey” is set up. Parents like to see the faces of their children as they meet the teachers and though this may not be entirely possible, clever staging can amplify the visual appeal of this process.

In many schools the graduation ceremony, apart from putting the spotlight on students, puts it firmly on the final year teacher/s, the principal and the deputies. In many instances, the other members of staff are happy for it to be like that. Teachers, in general, dislike being in public view. However, having an emotionally charged moment when the entire teaching staff stands confidently before the audience to show their sincere appreciation of the journey made by the leaving class, will have the parent community equally appreciative of the teachers.

It’s a public relations exercise not to be missed and I hope more schools will embrace the idea of making this significant event a rite of passage that not only acknowledges the child but the many dedicated adults who helped them along the way.