



PATRICK CHAPPATTE

PUBLIC SCHOOL TALK

INTERVIEWS BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

We are warned that there is a crisis in American education. We learn about public schools in decline, of substandard scholastic standards, of the overcrowding of classrooms, of the inequality of funding — wealthier school districts receiving disproportionate funding while poor students attend bad schools that are chronically underfunded; and of course we are shocked at the shootings of students at schools by other students.

Millions of Americans are back in school this fall. Students, teachers, principals, administrators, janitors, bus drivers. They attend, teach, administrate or try to keep clean public schools, parochial schools both religious and secular, which include military academies and boarding schools. In addition experimental schools, community-based private schools and home education curriculums attempt to extend the concepts of education beyond standard practices that are at the heart of increasing public criticism.

Ideas of educational reform abound, in practice as well as theory. The general goal of most reforms is to make public schools work for everyone. Yet the decline of academic standards is blamed on exactly that premise.

A teacher wrote in an essay recently, "I have given passing grades to students who failed all of their tests, to students who refused to read their assignments, to students who were absent as often as not, to students who were not even functionally literate. I have turned a blind eye to cheating and outright plagiarism, and I have given As and Bs to students whose performances were at best mediocre...I have sent students to higher grades, to higher education, and to the workplace unprepared for the demands that would be made of them." He wrote that he is a "servant of the force that thwarts nearly every effort to reform American education...the floating standard." Americans want quality education, he said, but when lower grades and higher failure rates reach their own children's classes, they rebel and schools relent.

Harry Johnson of Astoria wrote in these pages in 1993: "The kids arrive at 1st grade full of energy and expectations. By the 4th grade they are ground down by boredom, humiliation and irrelevance. By the 6th grade, most hate school."

The Times Eagle asked a few coastal folk what they thought of education in America. The following pages are their responses.

JESSI DUNKIN

I think right now that the education system is really messed up. Because of all the school shootings they need more security, which costs a lot of money. I don't think schools have enough money or enough teachers. My school is complaining they don't have enough teachers but they don't go out to hire more, maybe because there are not enough classrooms.

I think education's all screwed up right now, but I have really great teachers.

(Jessi Dunkin starts the fall school year as an 8th grader at Astoria Middle School. Her plans for the future are to teach 3rd grade, which she says is the best year to teach: the kids are used to being in school, they should know how to read well enough and the math is simple. She is also interested in being an interior decorator or a Foley artist, a person who enhances sound effects for movies or shows. After high school she thinks she will attend either the University of Oregon or Oregon State. She spent the past summer as a member of the cast of 'Shanghaied in Astoria', as a dancer and a daughter.)

THEO ROOPER

I don't think schools should concentrate so much on math and do more music instead. There should be more theater options — at least in elementary and middle school. In elementary school only one teacher gave music lessons and it was harmonica; at talent shows they have harmonica ensembles. The middle school has a good program. I'm starting high school so I don't know yet how good its programs are.

The drama programs should be better. In 7th grade there was only one drama class and it was packed. I couldn't get in.

I think the education system is pretty good. I think school principals should periodically monitor teachers in their classes to see how they do.

My dad is a school bus driver so my family has a lot to do with the local education system.

Probably the best treated grade is Kindergarten. I want to be a Kindergartner again. We went to school half-day, got nap time and had a snack. Kindergarten was awesome!

(Theo Rooper is a freshman this new school year at Astoria High School. He is 14, the son of Mark and Jennifer Rooper. He would like to be an actor [he played 'Wong Long' in the 1999 production of 'Shanghaied in Astoria'] because "You don't have to be very smart to be an actor." He also thinks about being an Astronaut, a writer or a Kindergarten teacher. "I know what I want to be when I grow up," he says. "An adult!")

JOHN NELSON

When you mention education, everybody's an expert. Being married to an educator, I have a different perspective than I might have otherwise.

There's a lot of waste in the system and the bureaucracy is overloaded. The education bureaucracy is so heavy they don't know what to do.

In the deep Depression years when I was going to school my folks and neighbors all got enough money together to keep us in school.

Education should be in with the national defense budget. We have all of these sophisticated weapons systems but nobody well educated enough to operate them.

(John Nelson lives in Astoria. He spent 49 years in the U.S. Merchant Marine, which includes 14 years as an instructor at the Tongue Point Job Corps Center Sea School.)

LARRY LONNEN

There is enough money in the educational system but it is wasted on the administrative part. Kids aren't being taught anymore because the curriculum isn't there. You have a system over-seeing education but few teachers teaching.

The bureaucracy is way out of proportion. We have this EDS — 50 people and I don't know what they do.

We have Washington, D.C. dictating what we do with our schools in Astoria.

Put money back into the schools and turn back bureaucracy and put it into the teaching of children.

The money is there — why isn't it being used to educate children instead of creating larger administrative bureaucracies?

(Larry Lonnen retired to Astoria after almost 40 years in the U.S. Navy and started his own business of home restoration, Victorians Unlimited.)

BRIAN SHAFFER

I think everybody should have an education.

The public school system is not good. It needs fixing. I don't have anything positive to say about it.

The people who need the help in school don't get it. Many are made to feel outcast. The whole public school system is not about education but who you fit in with.

You have less of a dropout rate in private schools, and they tend to do better academically than kids in public schools. There is more attention paid to learning and a more equal playing field because of uniforms. The reason kids drop out of public

school is because of the disparity of who can afford styles and fashions.

(Brian Shaffer is a cook at the Ship Inn in Astoria.)

KIRAH SOLOMON

I think that teachers are too easy on students. Too many are moving on into grades and graduating and don't have a good handle on what they're taught.

Our language is a good example. Too many kids are getting out of school and they don't know the English language very well. Students aren't reading very well, they don't write very well nor speak very well. Yet in what instance doesn't one have to communicate?

(Kirah Solomon lives in Astoria. She played Virginia Sweet in this past summer's 'Shanghaied in Astoria'.)

KRISTA RUPERT

Education is pretty cool. It's quite fine because they try to teach the learning process. I've been in about three different school districts. This district is highly recommended because it does what is appropriate to get a good education.

(Krista Rupert begins 8th grade at Astoria Middle School. She spent the summer playing in 'Shanghaied in Astoria' and thinks she wishes to be an art teacher.)

LORETTA CHRISTIANSEN

I think the education system is too easy because I did just nothing and I got good grades. I should not have graduated but I did. I am going to Clatsop Community College and go to school some more.

(Lori Christiansen is a 1999 graduate of Astoria High School. She was in this season's 'Shanghaied in Astoria' and says she wants to be a singer.)

JORDAN GUENTHER

I think the schools concentrate on a lot of rules that are tedious. It's not very worldly the way they teach in junior high school, and has nothing to do with the real world.

(Jordan Guenther is beginning his freshman year at Warrenton High School. He was the irrepressible Master of Ceremonies for the 1999 production 'Shanghaied in Astoria'.)

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