

PARENTS TALK BACK

Give me a report card I can understand!

Courtney Rawlins remembers those days in grade school when she and her classmates would get on the bus carrying a report card sealed in an envelope. Five subjects with letter grades ranging from A to F awaited the child. “You would open it, and boom,” she said. “That’s how you were doing.” If her third-grader tried to look at his own report card the same way, he would have no idea what to take from it. His four-page report card has a 39-page rubric to explain what each line item might mean. “Why is there a 39-page document to understand my 8-year-old’s report card?” she asked.



Rawlins, whose children attend public schools in the St. Louis area, says she understands the district’s desire to provide parents with detailed information. “But you can’t see the forest for the trees,” she said. For parents with children in grade school now, the changes in the school report card can be shocking. We grew up with a standard system of reporting grades, pretty much throughout the country. Now, each district in each state may have its own method of marking grades. The school may use a system of numbers from 1 to 4, letters representing words from Needs Improvement to Outstanding, or a range of words from Below to Proficient to Advanced. And the kindergarten to second grade report cards may be different from the upper grades. The report card used to be the primary tool for parents to quickly understand how well their child was doing in school. It’s become anything but.

But even the older system of letter grades was not as clear as we assumed it to be said Kevin Beckner, coordinator of student assessment in St. Louis’ Parkway School District. “A B- means different things to different people,” he said. For some people, a C might represent the average. For others, it means something is off-track with the student’s learning. “So, which is it?” he asked. Most parents today would not accept a report card filled with C’s for a child who is meeting expectations as he should. “We all had, growing up, one system. We internalized what the connection was between the learning and the letter,” he said. Now, the goal is to more clearly communicate specifically what a student is learning, and there’s a different language used to express that. Sometimes, things get lost in translation. Rawlins has seen her child get the same score in two subjects, one of which she believes he is much stronger in than the other.

“My concern is that we can float through thinking our children are doing fine, but could they be doing better?” Beckner said his district trains teachers to provide detailed comments on the report cards and answer any questions through emails, calls or conferences. Rawlins agrees that, in her own school, it’s the direct communication with the teachers that is most helpful. The gradual shift in report cards over the past decade reflects the move toward referencing grades against how well students reach a given standard. It’s difficult for parents to know how well the student has mastered that material compared to his or her peers. If your child gets a “3” in math, an “S” for Satisfactory or a “Proficient” for meeting expectations, how wide is that range of ‘Satisfactory’? Has she learned the material solidly, near the top of the pack, or is she barely scraping by? In a previous era, this may have been communicated by the difference between a B- and a B+.

Now, there may be dozens of subcategories within math, each with its own score, and the parent is left to decipher how well the child has learned what was taught. It can get even more complicated depending on a teacher’s own interpretation of how to score each grading period. For example, one teacher may measure how a student is progressing compared to their goal for the year. Near the beginning of the year, a student may earn a “P” for Progressing, with that grade hopefully reflecting full mastery by the end of the year. In the very same school, the teacher in the next classroom may be marking students based on how well they’ve learned the content simply within that given grading period. This lack of consistency within schools and across districts makes the report card less useful for parents. Rawlins, who has a degree in economics, said she has an understanding of numbers and spreadsheets, but that the complicated report cards still baffle her. She plans to ask her school to host a Parents Night to explain the mysteries behind the report cards.

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Aisha Sultan is a St. Louis-based journalist who studies parenting in the digital age while trying to keep up with her tech-savvy children.

It may be lucky, but it’s not bamboo

By LEE REICH
Associated Press

The New Year is still young so let’s continue to welcome it in — with some lucky bamboo. At this time of year, this plant appears in supermarkets and plant stores across the country. It may or may not be lucky, but bamboo it ain’t. Lucky bamboo does look a lot like bamboo. The jointed stalks are typically one-half to three-quarters of an inch across, with a tuft of strappy leaves sprouting either from their tops or from the side of one of their upper joints. Sometimes the leaves have yellow stripes, and on some plants the stalks spiral around rather than continuing straight up.

Arranging for beauty and happiness

Stalks are sometimes offered loose, but the plant sitting on my desk is a decorative arrangement of three stalks, one about 6 inches high and the other two each about 4 inches high, bound together with a gold ribbon and planted in an Asian-style pot. According to feng shui, that ancient art of harmonizing our surroundings, my little planting is a positive influence on the energy around it, and the three-stalk arrangement attracts happiness.

Easy care

With such supposed powers, lucky bamboo is a plant well worth caring for. Fortunately, it’s very easy to grow. Light? No problem. Lucky bamboo will survive quite happily in relatively low light. Too much is more likely to do it harm, resulting in water-soaked splotches on the leaves. Fertilizer? No problem. Lucky bamboo can go for a long



AP Photo/Lee Reich

With five stalks (one hidden), this clump of lucky bamboo is slated to bring wealth to its custodian, in New Paltz, New York.

time with little or no fertilizer. As with light, too much is more likely to cause problems than too little, with scorched leaves providing evidence of fertilizer burn. Watering is a little trickier, but only marginally so. Plants will survive for long periods with the bottoms of their stalks in plain water or supported in pebbles

OUT OF THE VAULT

Athena bank robbery perpetrated by repeat offender

Some footprints in the snow and the idea that the thieves knew what they were doing when they tunneled through the back wall of the bank were the only clues police and the FBI had to go on following the burglary of the Athena branch of the U.S. National Bank of Portland on Feb. 5, 1948. Bank manager F.S. LeGrow said only a person who knew all about the building and the vault would have chosen to tunnel through the 30-inch-thick brick wall from the basement stairway. The floor and ceiling of the vault were reinforced with steel rails, but the walls were vulnerable. Bank bookkeepers Bonnie Mayberry and June Thomas discovered the theft the morning of Feb. 6.



The thieves took \$8,900 in coins from the vault, mostly in quarters and dimes, and the bags were so heavy it would have been difficult to carry them far. A severe storm the night of the robbery hampered efforts to track the men, but a blockade was placed around Walla Walla when a gas station attendant



EO file photo

Bonnie Mayberry (left) and June Thomas, Athena bank bookkeepers, attempt to heft bags of money similar to those stolen in a bank robbery Feb. 5, 1948.

reported customers who appeared so nervous they could hardly wait until the service was completed. One week later, police arrested Theodore James Audett, 43, a Umatilla cafe

manager, and recovered \$8,500 of the loot from a sagebrush cache near Echo. Some of the money was found stashed in the Damsite Cafe where he worked. No other arrests were made but Sheriff R.E. (Bob) Goad said

there was no way the 6-foot-tall, 180-pound Audett could have fit through the 15-inch hole chiseled in the bank wall. Audett was well known to law enforcement across the nation as “Bum Rap” for his repeated complaints that his many sentences were unjustified. Following his honorable discharge from the Canadian army in 1921, Audett began his life of crime and served sentences for liquor theft, car and boat thefts and several prison beaks, and was released from Alcatraz in 1940 only to be caught the same year trying to tunnel into a bank vault in Whitman, Nebraska. He was conditionally released from Alcatraz again in 1945. U.S. Deputy Marshal Frank Myers took Audett to Portland, where he waived a preliminary hearing and asked that no bond be set. He was remanded to the federal district court. June (Thomas) Schmidtgall worked for the Athena bank for 32 years before her retirement. She still lives in Athena. The story was suggested to me by her son.

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ODDS & ENDS

Man scooped up by California garbage truck survives ride

WOODLAND, Calif. (AP) — A man searching for his wallet in a trash bin in Northern California was scooped up by a garbage truck and taken on a long ride. The *Oroville Mercury Register* reports that the man survived the ride in the rear of a garbage truck. His name was not released. Yolo County Sheriff’s Lt. Martin Torres said the man got stuck in the trash truck when it made a pick-up Tuesday. The truck was headed to a landfill. Torres said the man told police he was stuck in the truck for about an hour. Authorities said the man told police he used lumber in the truck to reach the top of the garbage pile and avoid the compactor. The man was taken to UC Davis Medical Center for complaints of back and neck pain.

Irish grandma busted for possessing cocaine at bingo hall

DUBLIN (AP) — Helen Heaphy’s number came up at the bingo hall. The prize was a trip to court. The 50-year-old grandmother pleaded guilty Wednesday to two counts of possessing cocaine for sale or supply after Irish police caught her with the narcotic outside a Cork bingo hall. Cork District Court Judge Leo Malone accepted her lawyer’s plea for clemency citing her family obligations and her possession of a relatively small amount of the drug worth 350 euros (\$400). Heaphy insisted she was holding the cocaine for an unspecified friend. Malone fined Heaphy 750 euros (\$870) but gave her no jail time, despite having two prior convictions for drugs possession and obstructing a police narcotics unit. She even was allowed to go back to playing bingo at the hall after the owner relented.

County’s 1st meeting adjourned due to lack of advertising

UNIONTOWN, Pa. (AP) — The first commissioners’ meeting of 2015 adjourned after 15 minutes in one western Pennsylvania county because the government hadn’t placed legal advertisements listing the time and dates of this year’s meetings. The Fayette County commissioners, instead, pointed fingers at one another — and the county’s chief clerk — about who was to blame for not placing the ads. Chief Clerk Amy Revak says she emailed the commissioners Vincent Zapotosky, Angela Zimmerlink and Al Ambrosini on Jan. 13 seeking authorization to place the ads, but got no response. But Zapotosky says Revak also didn’t place the ads last year, forcing the cancellation of a meeting in May. He argued that Revak should know to place the ads without authorization. The meeting was canceled when a resident pointed out

that the meeting hadn’t been advertised. ■
Man delivers 1 pizza, gets \$2,084 tip
ANN ARBOR, Mich. (AP) — Now that’s a special delivery! A group of real estate agents meeting in Ann Arbor surprised a man by giving him a \$2,084 tip for delivering one pizza Thursday. The man, identified only as Rob, was stunned and said on video, “All I did was deliver pizza.” Agents from Keller Williams Realty all pitched in while attending the company’s regional conference. Stacey McVey says they wanted to show their appreciation to someone from the service industry. Besides cash, the man received a Visa gift card, lottery tickets and letters of encouragement. Brian LeFevre, delivery manager at Pizza House in Ann Arbor, says the lucky delivery man was “ecstatic.” He says “that’s a pretty good day’s work” for just one pizza.