

# Comfortable with the concept of mixing ages on school buses

When the kids in Groton return to school this fall the middle school and high school will be on the same schedule, which means they'll be riding the same buses, a fact that has some parents of younger students understandably concerned.

My own experience growing up, and later teaching in this area, makes me fairly comfortable with the concept of mixing ages.

I remember when I turned 11 and left Cub Scouts to join Boy Scout Troop 34 in Mystic, I was very impressed with the boys in the senior patrol. These were fellows over the age of 14 who filled leadership roles in the troop: senior patrol leader, scribe and quartermaster. They also, along with our patrol leaders, taught basic skills such as knot tying and fist aid. Most of them were Star or Life rank.

When I went to Camp Wakenah,

the counselors were all high school or college students and some were Eagle Scouts. We looked up to them and learned a lot from. Most of them have gone on to successful careers in the New London area.

One of them, Steve Rocketto, who ran the rifle team, eventually became one of the top marksmen in the United States. I used to joke with my middle school students that I did more shooting at Boy Scout camp than in boot camp.

I never rode in a bus with any of those older scouts, but I did ride in the back of a pickup truck being driven by one of them. At that time Camp Wakenah ran from Sunday afternoon to Saturday morning. However, there were generally a few scouts who elected to stay over the weekend. These "stayovers," as we were called, were transported to church on Sunday morning in

the camp pickup, which I've been told was a Navy surplus Studebaker.

The Catholic boys were taken to Our Lady of the Lakes, and the Protestants went to Salem Congregational. At least one staff member stayed with each group.

To be sure, there was some hazing at camp, but it was pretty mild, such as snipe hunts and searching for the bacon stretcher or smoke shifter.

Of course, as was pointed out to me, this was all before the days of smart phones and Snapchat.

Many years later, when leading a summer camp at the Seaport, I had a small group that consisted of only four kids: three sophomores, two of whom were girls, and a fifth-grader, also a girl.

I was a little concerned about the disparity of ages and I quietly asked the fifth-grader if the older kids were giving her a hard time. She told me no, in fact they were being very nice to her.

One day I found out how nice. I had told the kids that they were welcome to bring their lunch, or if they felt flush, to buy it at the galley. So, one noon I sat down with the two older girls in front of the Spouter Tavern while the boy and the younger girl went to the galley. Several minutes later the boy returned alone, carrying a hot dog.

I asked about the youngster, and he told me he'd asked her if she wanted him to stay with her, but she told him she was OK. The two older girls berated him sharply.

"You left her alone? You left our munchkin! Go back and get her!"

Just at that point the child in question appeared.

On another occasion, also at the Seaport, we were making a video

for the education department and I had a group of kids ranging from fourth grade to ninth grade. One scene, which we shot several times, involved crossing Route 27 at the light by the south entrance.

On our first take I started out and looked back to be certain that I had everyone. What made me smile was seeing the ninth grader holding the fourth grader's hand as they crossed the street.

When I taught at Fitch Junior High, we had students in grades seven through nine, and teachers taught all three grades. One morning one of my seventh graders came in wearing makeup - a lot of makeup. It looked like she'd put it on with a putty knife!

I asked if mom had seen her before she left for school, and she said no. I knew she was going to take a lot of razzing. I saw Shauna, one of my ninth graders (who I later found out used to babysit the younger child), and asked her to show the young one how to do makeup correctly.

After a trip to the girls' room, they returned and the seventh grader was wearing just a little blush and light pink lipstick. I smiled and nodded yes.

I remember one day standing in the main hall of A-wing and noticing a small seventh grade girl who looked rather nervous. She explained to me that she had to go to science class, which was in D-wing, where the ninth graders had their homerooms, and she was a little scared.

Just at that point two of my ninth grade boys came down the stairs. I stopped them and asked them if they'd accompany the girl to science. They looked at her and said, "Come with us, kid. Ain't

nobody going to bother you."

And there they went, the two freshman football players with the little girl between them.

When we became a middle school and introduced what we called flex, which was an activity period where the kids got to choose, I was one of the few teachers who welcomed kids from all three grades. My flex was Stamp Club, which entailed both traditional philately and the transcription and research of actual correspondence from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Having all three grades together made my job easier. Instead of teaching the same basic skill, such as using stamp hinges or deciphering handwriting where the letter 's' looks like an 'f,' I had older kids who could help the younger ones.

I wouldn't have been able to run my flex without the older students since I sometimes had 35 kids at a time in my room.

The postal history studies, many of which were large collections of family correspondence, were often passed on year after year. One project was worked on for 20 years. We used to joke that we knew more about that family than the descendants did.

Will there be problems on the buses? Possibly, but I'm pretty sure the school administrators have given it serious consideration. My recommendation would be to have the high school kids sit in the back of the bus and the middle school kids in the front.

They may even want to consider a bus monitor. But I think it can work.

Robert F. Welt is a retired Groton Public Schools teacher who lives in Mystic.

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## IN THE GALLERIES

### Gallery One presents Victor Filepp solo exhibit

The "Houses of the Holy" exhibition features work of Gallery One artist and photographer Victor Filepp. In this solo exhibit, he focuses his lens on the houses of worship in New London, where he resides. Connecticut-based Gallery One is a virtual gallery representing a diverse group of established artists whose works reflect

different artistic traditions.

The exhibition features photographs of the exteriors of nearly 30 churches and synagogues within the city limits. The collection engages the eye with monochromatic images that examine the physical structures, architecture, and light and dark patterns of the church facades.

"The images consider the devo-

tion engendered by religion that has inspired beauty in architecture and ornament while reflecting my concern that religion can at times divide us by faith and race," Filepp said.

The exhibit is open for viewing on the gallery's virtual exhibit platform and runs through Aug. 8. To view the virtual exhibit, visit the Gallery One website at galleryonect.com.