

*UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA*

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The School of Medicine

Department of Pathology  
and Laboratory Medicine  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6082

6 June 1991

Dr. Marshall A. Ledger  
Office of Public Information  
Medical Center  
200 Blockley Hall / 6021

Dear Marshall:

Since you're building a file, I thought this would give you some idea of my other enthusiasm--education--even though it's in a rather unusual context.

Sincerely yours,



Peter C. Nowell, M.D.

PCN:lbd  
Enclosure

PENN

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND THE SCHOOL IN ROSE VALLEY -- Peter C. Nowell

I have been asked to say a few words about why I believe so strongly in the School in Rose Valley and the educational principles that it practices. I suspect that your first reaction may be: "What does a white-haired old man know about education in the pre-school and kindergarten?" In fact, I have some credentials on three counts: my family involvement with the school for four generations; my own experience as an educator, in trying to apply the SRV principles at the medical school level; and the observations I have made on many graduates of the school and the effect it had on them. I would like to say a few words about each of these aspects.

The family involvement can be recounted briefly: my father helped build the school; my mother taught here; I went here, with my brothers; my children went here; and two grandchildren are now here, with more to come. My son and his wife are on the faculty, and my daughter works part-time in the office. So we have indeed had a long-term involvement.

My role as an educator needs a bit more elaboration. I have taught at the Penn Medical School for thirty-five years, and also served for some fifteen years on the board of Wesleyan University, one of our better liberal arts schools, and chaired its Education Committee. At both levels, I have tried to foster the educational principles practiced at SRV, and I would like to mention a few of them and indicate how and why I think they are important both here and in medical school.

The first, of course, is the John Dewey principle that "learning begins with experience." Here, it means that the kids go out and gather apples, make apple sauce, and then write a story about it, or use arithmetic in calculating how much sugar is needed in the recipe. Experience comes first, then the symbols. It also means being in the shop at age three or four, learning to saw, learning to measure, and calculating how much wood is needed to finish a project. I still have scars on my thumb from my experience in learning to saw in the first shop of this school. I believe that in medical school the principle is equally important. Typically, in most medical schools, we sit the students in lecture halls and pour facts on their heads for two years before they ever see a patient. Twenty years ago, at Penn, we revised the curriculum so that they saw patients after only brief exposure to the lecture hall, and if I had my way they would see patients on day one. The facts make much more sense when you get them in the context of a sick patient and his disease, but yet it has been extremely difficult to sell this point of view to many of the faculty. Fortunately, the students appreciate it, and we have been able to maintain this principle of early clinical exposure.

We have also been able to institute another important principle: treating each student as an individual. At Rose Valley,

this means encouraging and building on a child's strengths, allowing him to explore and expand in areas of particular interest, and also giving extra assistance in areas of weakness. It does not mean license, but it does mean boundaries that are appropriate to the individual child. In medical school, this has meant breaking up the traditional lock-step curriculum and giving students significant elective time to pursue in depth particular areas where they feel their careers may be headed. All of our students can explore a variety of options, and approximately twenty-five percent of them now take a full year out of the regular curriculum to work in one or another area of special interest.

A corollary of this flexibility, both at SRV and in medical school, is continued enthusiasm for learning, and recognition, by the student, that the responsibility for education ultimately lies with him. Here, it means that the kids really enjoy the school and do not have their interest in and enthusiasm for learning, which they bring to kindergarten, knocked out of them, as is done in many of our traditional school systems. In fact, on several occasions this school has been extended to eighth grade--because the sixth graders refused to graduate. In medical school, it means that the students recognize the necessity for directing their own educational experience and, even more importantly, realizing that if they are going to be competent and responsible physicians, they are going to have to continue educating themselves for the rest of their lives. When I first meet with my small student group in Pathology each year, I tell them: "I'm not here to teach you anything; I'm here to help you to learn." The transition is somewhat difficult for many students, who have gotten to medical school by memorizing facts handed them by the professor and regurgitating them on multiple-choice examinations, but most of them get the message, and the result is a much happier, more motivated student.

Finally, at SRV children also learn to respect and value other people, even when they are different, and also the environment around them. I will not expand on this, but it is also important in medical school, where increasing attention is being devoted to ethical questions as well as to the scientific basis of medicine.

The third area I want to mention briefly concerns my observations on other graduates of Rose Valley. This has occurred in a number of settings. Several years ago, for my mother's ninetieth birthday, I collected the names of about a hundred of her former students from the Rose Valley files and wrote to them indicating that she would be delighted to hear from them. Remarkably, she received some forty letters in return, as well as a number of phone calls, from all over the United States and even from foreign countries. The message was consistent: they extolled her as a teacher and also described the important positive influence that the school had had on their lives. Remember, these are people who graduated thirty or forty years ago, writing to a grammar school teacher! When my mother died several months ago, we received a number of additional similar letters, and Ruth Goodenough has also collected many such responses in her survey of the alumni.

Also, as many of you know, we had the big Sixtieth Anniversary party last spring, and individuals ranging from their nineties down to their teens came from all over the country. Unfortunately, my kindergarten teacher, Lucy Stevens, at a hundred and two, could not attend because she had just moved to Vermont, but she had been here the year before to speak at Grandparents' Day. At the anniversary dinner, we had someone from each decade get up and talk about their memories of SRV, and again the message was remarkably consistent: a very positive influence on their lives, leaving them with enthusiasm for learning. There was also an important message from the youngest graduates, now in junior high school and high school, because I know many SRV parents worry about the transition to traditional systems. They, like their predecessors, said it was not a big problem. SRV graduates are bright enough to adapt to the requirements of other schools, but also, typically, they get a bit more out of them, asking questions and sometimes shaking up the teachers, which is probably a good thing.

So, this is the general message from the vast majority of Rose Valley graduates. They look back on their experience here as having been very enjoyable and having strongly influenced their subsequent careers. There is one unfortunate part of the story: if you would like your children to support you in your old age, in the manner to which you would like to be accustomed, don't send them to Rose Valley. Very few SRV graduates have ended up getting rich. They have generally gone into careers they enjoy, and ones that provide some service to society, many of them in education. This has been tough on the school, too, because it has not had many graduates in a position to give large sums to enhance the endowment.

But most of them end up as happy, useful people--and let me finish up with just one illustrative anecdote and then a story that summarizes my own feelings. The anecdote concerns a seminar in tumor immunology that I was giving for graduate students several years ago, and one young woman kept asking questions. After the session, I spoke to her and suggested that she did not come across as the average graduate student. "I'm not," she said. "I'm a surgeon in Wilmington. I just came up to try to learn something. And I know you," she said. "My name is Brodhead, and I went to the School in Rose Valley also." And despite the relatively small total number of graduates out there, this kind of incident is not unique.

My final story concerns a cancer research prize that the General Motors Cancer Research Foundation gave me last year. I was allowed a two-minute acceptance speech, and so I decided that, rather than review my own career as most recipients did, I would tell Roger Smith and the other assembled dignitaries what we planned to do with the prize money. I said we were going to put it into a pot to assure that our grandchildren, who, fortunately, all live in the area, would have the opportunity to attend the School in Rose Valley. I told them something about the school, and then said that we really believed that this was the key to the

future of cancer research, and of society: young, eager minds anxious to learn and to tackle the problems of society. We could not, of course, guarantee this outcome for any particular child, but we thought that the combination of the school and family influences made it a pretty good gamble. So maybe this is what you parents should pass on to your parents, if economics is a factor in whether your children stay here. Tell them this story, tell them to attend Grandparents' Day, and I will be there to reinforce it.

In any event, I hope I have given you some indication of why I personally retain great enthusiasm for the school, and why, with continuing parental involvement from folks such as you, I think it will continue to be the wonderful place it has been for the past sixty years.