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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

Only One Birthday per Mont

Last May, the Manchester Union Leader reported that the local school board had voted, with one member dissenting, to limit classroom birthday parties to one per month. The idea was to have only one “group” party, rather than one for each child.

The driving force behind the board’s action was to improve the kids’ nutrition. “If there were three birthdays in a week, a student could have cupcakes three times,” said the school district’s dietitian. “That’s why we’re encouraging one birthday for kids in a month.”

The dissenter said “I don’t think we should be the food police...It’s a child’s special day.” She blamed childhood obesity largely on inactivity. As the only board member who actually works as a teacher, she said the board should be focused more on education.

What struck me about this piece of news was not the question of whether or not classroom birthday parties should be limited to one per month. Not even that the impetus for the change was better nutrition. Not even that the lone dissenter felt the board should focus elsewhere (although that seems a good idea).

What struck me was the very existence of classroom birthday parties at all. Now I was in grammar school in the 1940s, and I cannot remember there having been any birthday parties in either of the two schools I attended. We did not have parties. As I remember there was a Valentine exchange and we put on a Christmas play. But there weren’t parties to celebrate the students’ birthdays or other personal events.

The existence of these classroom birthday parties might be linked to two modern societal phenomena: declining academic achievement and the celebration of self. Let’s consider.

According to a recent international survey, the United States spends more than other developed nations on its students’ education each year. Nevertheless, the United States ranks well below other nations on internationally standardized math and science tests administered to fourth and eighth graders. SAT reading scores continue on a four-

decade decline. As the schools strive to reflect societal concerns and push related agendas, much of the curriculum is devoted to studies other than what someone my age would recognize as academics.

Our grandchildren know all about multi-culturalism and global warming but not so much about the founding fathers or Appomattox. Perhaps diverting valuable class time toward birthday parties is fun and strokes the ego - but it can't do much to enhance academic achievement.

The celebration of self, a relatively new trend, is on an upward trajectory. From the end-zone dance to hanging on the rim, the focus is certainly on the celebration of the "me" rather than on grace and humility. Although I've never touched a copy, I have it on good authority that there's actually a Self magazine. And children have become a focal point of this trend, with the modern family's attention and effort being focused on their children's activities, events and achievements. To top it off, in today's no-winners-or-losers world, every kid gets a trophy. Perhaps those classroom birthday parties are just an early manifestation of the celebration of self.

Permit me the indulgence of telling you that I have for some years donated my time to assessing university scholarship application essays. From that vantage point, I can personally report that the poor quality of the writing is eclipsed by the strength of the self-esteem exhibited in the applicants' essays. Indeed, there have been studies that have pointed to the inverse relationship between self-esteem and achievement.

A friend who is a teacher says that in her district there's a no-homework rule instigated by indulgent parents. She pities her students when they meet the cruel reality of college. She also reports that classroom parties are commonplace even at the high school level and she laments that education is secondary to self-indulgence. By contrast, a teacher at a less-affluent, under-achieving school reports that classroom parties are not allowed. Their administration has wisely decided to focus instead on education.

All of which brings us back to my surprise at learning that there are classroom birthday parties in grammar schools. If I were on the Manchester School Board, I would have voted with the majority to limit the number of parties. Not because of nutrition, but because the celebration of self does not belong in the classroom. It has no societal or academic benefit.

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