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**Exceptional Teachers**

**By Susan Dunn**

**Exceptional Teachers by Susan Dunn, MA, Personal and Professional Development Coach**

Miss Vashti was my first teacher. As soon as I turned six, the summer before I started first grade, I was taken to her house for piano lessons. I felt like a very "big girl" indeed.

Miss Vashti, her white hair piled atop her head, opened the door of her Victorian mansion, and ushered me into the inner sanctum. She motioned to me to climb up on the piano bench and have a seat, and then reached out and ran her bony knuckle down my spine so I sat up straight and tall.

Every teacher I've had since then that made an impression on me provided those two things: the inner sanctum and the finger down the spine. And they all got the best out of me.

They were able to excite me about their subject matter because of the way they created their environment and how they conducted themselves. To teach someone to learn to love learning is the highest calling.

Now the inner sanctum and the bony finger are both metaphoric. Neither actually occurred. Here's what I mean by those terms.

**INNER SANCTUM**

The classrooms of those special teachers were different. We always settled down the minute the bell rang, opened our books and got to work. They approached their subject matter and us, the students, with reverence.

When I entered Miss Vashti's house, it was darkened and she spoke in hushed tones. She didn't tap my turned up nose like everyone else, or talk to me like I was a little kid. She talked to me the same way she talked to my grandmother. You bet I stood up straight and tall!

Everything was in its place, orderly, in a deep sense. It felt to me like it was a privilege to be there.

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The classrooms of teachers who impressed me were not just clean, but cared about. Their bulletin displays contained things about character and learning. Though I couldn't have verbalized it, I was more interested in learning how to be, than in learning Geography.

My first piano lesson was to place my finger on middle C (oh the mystery of it all!), and then to read the first page in the music book. It was about practicing. There was a picture of a little girl on a trail that ended with "success" and there were pictures of the pitfalls all along the route which were labeled, "the bog of despair," and "the forest of sloth." Lazy girls would never learn to play the piano! I did not want to be a lazy girl.

Each lesson began by playing scales, then the piece I was learning with correction. Then I was to play the piece for Miss Vashti to "enjoy." Have you any idea how that made me feel? Miss Vashti sat back

with her eyes closed and her hands folded and I gave her pleasure. I felt honored.

The classrooms of exceptional teachers also had ritual, daily and weekly. It was easier to keep quiet in Mrs. Winger's class on Monday when we knew Tuesday was discussion day.

### THE FINGER DOWN THE SPINE

The teachers had high standards which they made clear and then modeled. "Turn around, sit up straight, put your feet on the floor, look straight ahead, no talking unless you're called upon." That's the finger down the spine. That's how it's done, as you know if you follow FlyLady ( <http://www.flylady.com> ) - put on your lace-up shoes and shine your kitchen sink.

Why does this work? Because if you put on your lace-up shoes, you have run the finger down your spine, and if you shine your kitchen sink, you have taken action. You've done one thing and the rest is then manageable. Cleaning a house is, after all, just shining one sink, and then shining the next sink.

Mr. Pink, my high school English teacher, read a long list to us: "Your papers must be tidy. No ink smudges, no pencil smears, no wrinkles or crumples. The only excuses I will accept for late papers are ..."

And how do you write an English paper? Neatly, without crumpling your paper, with a nice pen. There. Manageable and under control. Treat the PAPER with respect. The finger down the spine. Put on those lace-up shoes and suddenly the project isn't totally overwhelming.

Beyond standards, the exceptional teachers talked about character and what's the right thing to do. Dr. Duda, my high school Latin teacher, discovered that kids had been making fun of one of the girls in the class. Without the girl present, Dr. Duda spent 15 minutes one class pacing the front of the room giving us a lecture on how to treat people - with dignity and respect. She was almost goose-stepping, emphasizing how displeased she was. She also told us how to treat someone with respect. It's always so nice to instruct along with your criticism, i.e., not this, but THIS.

Aware of the cruelty often imposed on my fellow classmates, I suddenly felt safer. Here was one

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teacher who had actually noticed and was not going to allow it. Only when you feel safe, can you learn.

The best teachers addressed the emotional side of things. Mr. Ramon, another Latin teacher, started the second lesson with a contradictory grammar rule and said, "You are thinking 'My teacher has lied to me.'" Yes, I was, and it was confusing. Much about learning was confusing and it was so nice to have someone verbalize it. Today he says "Do it this way." The next day, "No, do it this way." It's the story of your life as a kid, and as a teen as well. Mr. Ramon was assuring us that while the material was not consistent, he was still in charge of the mess.

My junior year in high school, a student had committed suicide. The tragic news made its way quickly down the halls, in whispers but was ignored by the teachers. When we got to Mr. Adams' geometry class, instead of taking his usual formal stance, he sat on the edge of his desk and talked about what had happened. Not a word was mentioned in any other class. Schools are more adept at handling such things these days.

### SUMMARY

The concept of the inner sanctum means make your place of teaching a sacred place for learning where students feel safe and where special things happen. Do this by the care you put into the décor and fixtures in the room, and also in the way you conduct yourself.

The finger down the spine is expectations and high standards. We all do better when a lot is expected of us. Not too much, but a lot. Things we have to stretch a little bit to get to. We have such pride when we accomplish something we perceived of as hard, and this is how we build self-esteem.

Exceptional teachers have presence. If you stand straight and tall, you're running your finger down your students' spines as well. Standing and delivering isn't in the military for no reason, after all.

If you're a teacher, be an exceptional one. If you're a learner, seek exceptional teachers. They'll leave you with more than how to conjugate Latin verbs.

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### **Public-school Teachers Know Best ---- They Send Their Kids To Private Schools**

**By Joel Turtel**

A study done by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that nationwide, public-school teachers are almost twice as likely as other parents to send their children to a private school. The study also found that more than one in five public-school teachers send their kids to private schools.

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In the biggest cities across America, the statistics get even more startling. In Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and 16 other big cities, more than 1 out of 4 public-school teacher's kids attend private schools. In some cities, almost half the public-school teachers do this. For example, in Philadelphia, 44 percent, and in Cincinnati, 41 percent of public-school teachers sent their kids to private schools.

Yet, across America, only about 12.2 percent of all parents who are not teachers send their children to private schools.

Now, why is this? Public school authorities keep telling us that they give our kids a good education. Yet they send their kids to private schools?

Well, teachers know best in this case. They actually work in the public schools every day. They see the kind of 3rd-rate, often mind-numbing education children get in these schools. Public-school teachers love their children like all other parents do. They want the best for their kids. So, is it any wonder that so many teachers send their children to private schools?

These statistics should be a warning signal for parents, a red flag waving briskly in the wind. If your children's teachers are sending their children to private schools, should you be keeping your kids in public school? If the soldier-teachers in the public-school trenches tell you that there is something very wrong with these schools, you should, for once, be listening to them.

Actions speak louder than words. The fact that so many public-school teachers send their kids to private schools should be all the proof you need that it might be wise for you to look for education alternatives for your kids elsewhere.

If you think you can't afford an expensive private school, you're happily mistaken. Joel Turtel's book, "Public School's, Public Menace" tells parents all about quality, low-cost Internet private schools. These private schools are a great new resource for giving your children an excellent education at an affordable price.

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