

## **Dying over spilt milk: The new reality at our schools**

**By Derek Dunn (Editor)**

My eldest started JK (Junior Kindergarten) this year. His mom and I were both there to tour his school, enter his classroom to meet his teacher, fight over an educational toy. We saw him off on the school bus the first day, waving from the window. Parents share a lot of joys during such transitional periods. But there was one thing about the whole sending-your-kids-off-to-school thing that left me out of the loop. The day a letter arrived from his teacher saying what items he can bring for snack.

It was a short letter.

Me, I could care less, ultimately, but my wife was disappointed. She's a stay at home mom. A good one who enjoys it. She was looking forward to sending him to school with brownies, muffins, whatever. But those things aren't on the list.

It's not a big deal for us at the moment. We understand that our kid won't die without nuts, and that a classmate could die from nuts. Still, there's something in me that wonders if the school has exhausted all other options before it sends a letter home to parents telling them not to bring healthy foods such as nuts. Shellfish, too. Not only that, but I've talked to parents whose letter suggested bringing ju-jubes and licorice. No, it's not a tremendous inconvenience, and the negative health effects on our child are minimal. But I don't like the lack of communication. I get the sense that, should you ask any questions, you are not being sensitive and politically correct.

That was my suspicion until recently when I got a phone call from a mother whose child attends St. Luke Elementary School. She feels as we do, and as all parents do, that no one wants to see harm come to a child who is allergic to nuts.

The problem is that now, added to the nuts list, is milk. Nuts are a small subsection of the food category "Meats and Alternatives." That means you can substitute tuna sandwiches for peanut butter. However, milk is an entire category. In the past few years kids who are deathly allergic to milk have entered the system.

Milk, cheese, yogurt: it is one quarter of Canada's Guide to Healthy Eating.

Milk is such an essential ingredient in a healthy diet that schools began offering milk programs. Many have abandoned those programs, saying it was too much effort to track the smelly drinking boxes. However, now it appears a virtual certainty that milk at school will become a thing of the past.

Some parents struggle as it is to get their kids to drink the two or three servings a day. Take away the morning and/or afternoon, and it poses a serious challenge.

I brought this up with Jim Watson's office. He is Minister of Health Promotion, but hadn't considered the paradox. How does the provincial government promote eating from the four food groups when some students are allergic to one of them? Watson's spokesperson, Adam Gracknik, said other departments were contacted, including health and education, but no actions are planned.

Meanwhile, at the school level, St. Luke Principal Ben Vallati is vehement in saying there is no "milk ban" at his school. Sure, teachers "encourage" parents not to pack milk, but there's no ban. Although at both the provincial and local levels, it is agreed that more and more children are developing allergies to nuts and milk, still there is no reason to make an issue out of it right now.

There is a child at St. Luke who is allergic to milk, but he is in kindergarten this year.

“Once that student goes into Grade one, the school will have to review its policy and possibly sit down with the individual’s parents,” Vallati said.

He wouldn’t give my phone number to the parent of the child with the milk allergy.

The parent I talked to from that school, who prefers to remain nameless, said many more parents believe they are being more than accommodating and are concerned that come next year milk will not be found on school property.

“They’ve made everybody else worry about milk allergies except the student with the allergy. He doesn’t have to change his life but every other kid in his class does,” she said. “I know that you don’t want to make anybody feel as though they are different. But when you are allergic to milk that makes you different.” She went on to say that she doesn’t know what the answer is but that she feels the school isn’t going to take a middle ground’ on the issue.

My concern includes a deeper problem. That of open and frank discussion of the issue. I find schools and school boards are notoriously secretive, certainly when it comes to dealing with the media.

Maybe they have their reasons, but I still say when I was what happened a few months ago I phone up the school administration to find out the name of a principal and the person on the other end of the line tells me they can share that information if it appears on their website, I think the entire institution needs to lighten up.

Even on the radio the other day, a teacher phones up to say her school doesn’t have a ban on the words “Merry Christmas.” But when the CFRA host, Lowell Green, asks for the name of the school, the teacher turns mute. It was similar reaction when word got out that a certain columnist was interested in doing a story on a student allergic to milk.

It’s as if a half dozen people met in the Situation Room.

It’s troubling to realize that many of the people responsible for educating your child appear eager to avoid public discourse, freedom of speech, in favour of a climate of secrecy Stalin himself would be hard pressed to outdo.

There are legal points in all of this, of course. And a family’s right to privacy is important, that’s why schools now require a consent form before a photojournalist can snap pictures. But to force thousands of teachers, staff and administrators to be “on the same message” as it was expressed to me, is simply anti-democratic.

Parents want assurance that every avenue has been exhausted before they tell their kids not to drink milk at lunch. That’s too sensitive a topic? I can’t find anybody to go on record to admit there is an issue brewing?

What happens if the day comes when a child develops an allergy to wheat?

God has a great sense of humour. Kids are allergic to healthy food like milk and nuts, never pop and candy.

*[File provided by the Editor of the Barrhaven Independent]*