

September 29, 2001

Mahalo Mr. Burnett!

"I'm sorry to tell you, that your son hasn't been doing his homework or participating in class activities. He's not interested in school," said our son's public school sixth grade teacher, Paul Burnett. My husband and I sat facing him across his desk during a parent teacher conference at the beginning of the school year. We weren't surprised to hear this poor evaluation of our son's school performance. Although he is an exceptionally bright child, who read a Michael Crichton book in three days when he was eight years old, he has never been a good student. We are used to hearing about him failing to live up to his potential at teacher conferences. We're used to feeling frustrated and like losers at raising good students.

After Mr. Burnett broke the expected news, he said something that we weren't used to, "I want you to know that my goal for your son this year is to get him interested in school and to do his assignments. It's my responsibility to get your son interested. I will find a hook." We were speechless. We couldn't believe a teacher would willingly accept such a daunting responsibility. We had been working at it, unsuccessfully, for years. While private school has been recommended many times for our children we believe learning how to get a long with the public is more important than academic success in early life. We tried everything else to get this intelligent child interested in school, and now here was a teacher telling us he was going to try. After I could speak again, I gushed "Oh, thank you!" My husband told him we would appreciate his efforts because so far ours had failed. While my husband spoke, the cynic in me thought, "And good luck buddy, because getting this kid interested in school won't be easy."

My husband and I walked out of the conference encouraged and excited. "Can you believe he said that?" we asked in unison in the school hallway. We both recognized that Mr. Burnett was a young teacher, this was his first class, and he wasn't jaded yet, but we felt relieved. We had an ally who would help in the battle to get our son to become a good student.

Our son is now interested in school. He does his homework without being asked or supervised. His handwriting is still terrible, but at least he does his assignments and turns them in, and after all there are computers. Most important, he has begun to learn that doing work and struggling to learn new things, can be a satisfying part of school. He is experiencing the consequences of putting time and energy into difficult activities, and then enjoying the satisfying results of his efforts. He is getting good grades, his parents have stopped nagging him, and school has become enjoyable for him because he is participating in the process the best he can. He is beginning to understand the power of his efforts.

Paul Burnett is a great teacher at Waiialua Elementary School in the rural area of the North Shore of O'ahu. He made an important difference in our son's life, a difference that has made all our lives better.

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