



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Another school year has begun, and for me, it's the end of an era. Our only child is a senior at Beaufort High (what?!), so this is my last official back-to-school column. My grand finale. My School Mom swan song.

That being the case, I wanted to make it spectacular. Unforgettable. So, naturally, I sat at my computer for hours staring at a blank screen, not a single idea forthcoming. Apparently, I've exhausted all my thoughts on this heartwarming, anxiety-inducing time of year. I'm all written out.

So for kicks, I decided to peruse some of my columns from years gone by, when I still had something to say on the matter. Our current website only goes back about a decade, so some of my earlier "wisdom" has been lost to posterity (oh, thank God!), and it seems I didn't write many back-to-school columns during the grammar school years, anyway. But it was amusing to read through some of my middle school/early high school reflections. Amusing for me, anyway. Your mileage may vary.

[From August 2013, Seventh Grade:](#)

This annual passage is always fraught with emotion, isn't it? Despite a sense of relief that our kids are back on a schedule – which means we can be, too – there's always this wistful feeling that summer has passed too quickly, that it's sifted through our fingers like so much Hunting Island sand. If you're like me, you didn't do everything you wanted to do. Not enough beach days . . . not enough bike rides . . . not enough walks in the moonlight, catching fireflies. (Okay, *none*

of those.) Sure, there will be another summer – there's always another summer – but when it comes, your children will be one year older – one year more attached to their friends and their smart phones... one year less attached to you.

I'm always moved by the first-day photos people post on Facebook. It's fun to follow the kids whose parents you knew as kids – a little taller each year, a little thinner (or fatter), a little more like their parents, a little more like *themselves*. The adolescents get to me, especially. There's something poignant about these not-quite-grown children, awkward in their school uniforms – or not, if they're lucky and live somewhere besides here – with their familiar expressions of hope and dread and wary optimism. You just want to wrap your arms around them and pull them close. "It'll be okay," you want to tell them. "There's nothing to fear," you want to say. But you were in middle school and high school once, and you know you'd be fudging the truth.

From August 2014, Eighth Grade:

Now that my daughter's in middle school, I have to get myself "buzzed in" at the front door before wrangling with the check-in machine. The door remains locked until some hapless parent like me shows up, is identified through two sets of windows, then clumsily attempts to open it quickly, while the green light is on. It invariably takes me three tries to sync up with the receptionist at the front desk, which is entirely my fault, not hers.

Again, I'm grateful that my daughter's school is locked up tighter than a maximum security prison, but I wish the phrase "maximum security prison" didn't float through my head when I think of my daughter's school. Does that make sense? (Hey, I told you this mother stuff isn't rational!)

Along with my illogical distaste for school security, I also have an unreasonable aversion to edu-speak. (Is that a word?) Education administrators have their own special language, and I continually try to learn it – I want to understand, I really do! – but it seems to change so frequently that I never get fluent. Every year, there's a new batch of acronyms and catch phrases being bandied about – a new list of "standards," a new "rubric," a new "program."

This year, at my daughter's school Open House, being "data-driven" was the big thing. The administrators are data-driven, the teachers are data-driven, and all the parents and students are encouraged to be data-driven, as well. I have nothing against data – I'm all for it, in fact – but I am naturally wary of any concept that's suddenly elevated to the heights where

“data-driven” currently resides. I also bristle – yep, there I go again – at the notion that my funny, quirky, one-of-a-kind girl-child can be reduced to a set of data. (Even it’s true, I don’t like it. So there.)

But my problem is really not with “data-driven.” I hope it works! Lord knows, we’ve tried everything else. My problem, I think, is with this dense, shifting, acronym-laced jargon that I don’t quite understand and am, therefore (again), left feeling like an outsider in my daughter’s life. Like a mother standing outside two layers of security-grade glass, frantically waving at a receptionist who doesn’t see her, waiting for the green light to flash, I feel shut out. Just like the check-in machine (which, I *know*, is a *good* thing!), edu-speak feels cold and impersonal and – okay, I’ll say it – a little bit scary.

[From August 2015, Freshman Year](#)

I never feel so parentally inept as I do during back-to-school time. I know what I’m supposed to do – nay, what I *have* to do – but my heart is never quite in it. So I waffle. I waver. And the older she gets, the more clearly my child can see that I’m waffling and wavering. Now that the stakes have been raised yet again, I must get my waffling, wavering self under control.

I must prepare, once more, to be the strict enforcer. The homework harpy. The project police. If I think the assignment is silly, or that the workload is too heavy, I can’t let on. If she’s up ‘til midnight working – after hours of extra-curriculars (which look good on the transcript!) – I have to be supportive but firm. Even as I’m quietly cursing under my breath. Even though I just want to tuck my baby in and sing her a lullaby.

And grades. GPAs. Transcripts. I’m supposed to pretend that they’re profoundly important – that the value of her education can be measured in letters and numbers, pluses and minuses – even as I secretly long for a world without grades, a world less obsessed with measures and standards. Even as I dislike the system, I must help my child succeed in it. That’s quite a trick, and I haven’t yet mastered it. One day I’m assuring her that “grades aren’t that important, as long as you’re learning and growing” (which is what I truly believe), while the next day, I’m frantically badgering her about “bringing up that math grade,” because – dammit – we’ve got a system where grades really *are* that important.

Because . . . college. Of course I want her to go. She's my child and that's what we do in our family. But even there, I have mixed emotions . . .

Back to August 2018, Senior Year:

And that's where I am today, folks. Wallowing in mixed emotions. Wherever you are in this joyful, sorrowful, beautifully harrowing adventure called parenthood, I know plenty of you are right there with me this week, so I'll leave you with the same words I left you with in **August of 2013**:

*The hardest part of parenting, I think, is that subtle switcheroo that has to happen – though you're never sure when, exactly – whereby the parent begins to follow the child's lead, instead of vice versa. At some point, we must learn to softly trail behind, in the direction of **their** choosing – ready to gently prod them forward, or catch them if they fall, but no longer leading them down our own preferred paths . . .*

So, dear parents, as another school year begins, here's to us! The brave, the stalwart, the perpetually confused. May we follow our hearts, our heads, our guts – and, the hardest part, our children – with all the wit and wisdom we can muster. And may we only second-guess ourselves a few times a day.