

Erik the Amazing Elastic Boy

Hurry, hurry, hurry! Step right up and hear one parent's take on why big-city public schools don't suck. BY TIM BRADY

Illustration by BOB DOB

MY KIDS GO TO Webster Enrichment Magnet School in St. Paul, a K through 6 elementary with one of the largest enrollments in the city. There are about 900 students, give or take the handful of children lost or gained in the inevitable shuffle of families in an urban school in a given academic year.

Being part of a large and colorful city school district is new to me. I grew up in a very small town, with very small public schools. Diversity was measured by head counts of Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists. The first time I walked my kids to Webster, saw the stream of giant 5th and 6th graders, and looked down at the kindergarten hands I was holding, I felt like we had just rowed to Devil's Island and I was dropping my children off with comforting lies about their chances of parole. We've since grown comfortable with their surroundings—they're tall enough now to worry new parents themselves.

Webster is located a stone's throw from Summit Avenue, but its "numbers"—the ethnic breakdown of the student body—tilt decidedly toward the neighborhoods north of the historic boulevard and its stately homes. Its student body is 56 percent African American, 20 percent Asian American, 20 percent Caucasian, 3 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Native American.

There are other numbers public officials keep close tabs on that I don't. I know there are a lot of free and reduced-fee lunchers, but I don't know how many. I know there are a lot of ESL kids, but I can't give you a percentage. I know that Webster gets pretty so-so grades in those state and national exams that have been mandated to measure the worth of a school. But I don't know just how it ranks compared to schools in, let's say, Dick Day's district.

Day is the state senator who at the end of this past spring's scintillating legislative session famously said that St. Paul and Minneapolis public schools "suck." Every parent of a public school kid in the Twin Cities, every public

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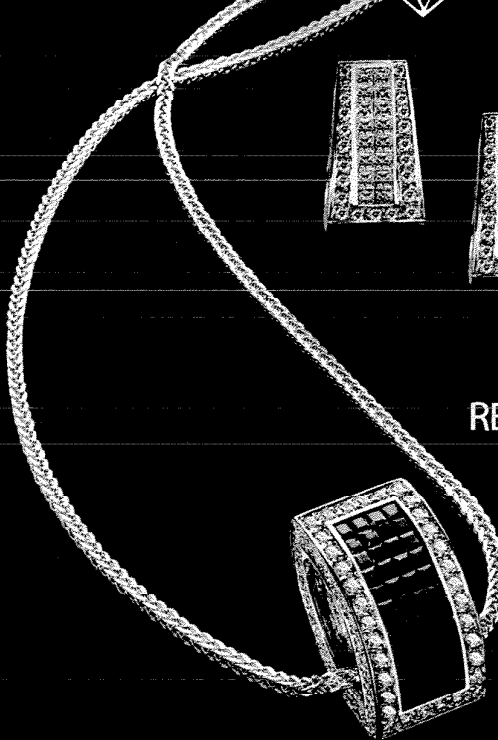
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school teacher or administrator, anyone whose hackles were raised at that comment, knows that he could drive down to Owatonna, or wherever the hell Dick Day comes from, pull into the town square, take out pen and paper, and start tallying what sucks there. But that would just give credence to his yakking. If you're one of those who appreciates the public schools of the Cities, you appreciate them heart and soul—so who is Dick Day anyway but another round little politician with Newt Gingrich hair?

I like that my kids are happy at Webster. I like the veteran teachers there. I like the fact that it's an old public school with silver radiators and black chalkboards. I like that this building has sheltered and taught a veritable wonderland of city kids in its 70-odd years of existence.

Which brings me to Erik the Amazing Elastic Boy.

Each year, Mr. Milner, the music teacher, organizes an hour-long talent show at Webster that features acts from all the grades in the school. This past year, that included a 1st grader from Scotland singing "Do-Re-Mi" from the *The Sound of Music*, at least two sets of hip-hop dancers, one solo violinist and one solo saxophone player, a large group of 3rd graders singing "Cinderella" by the Cheetah Girls, my daughter and a group of her friends performing a skit of their own creation called *Webster Speaks Many Languages*, and a little girl singing "Love Potion Number Nine" with innovative hand gestures.

The hands-down star of the show, though, was Erik the Amazing Elastic Boy. Erik stood on the stage of the drama room with slouched shoulders and downcast eyes as two of his 2nd grade buddies—who had a certain genius of their own—introduced his elastic routines.

"Erik the Amazing Elastic Boy will now put one ankle behind his head and hop on the other foot," the boys said in unison into the squawking mike. And, sure enough, Erik the Amazing Elastic Boy put one ankle behind his head and hopped on the other foot, to great applause.

"Erik the Amazing Elastic Boy will

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now do two sets of splits." And Erik did two sets of splits—one, while his hips were perpendicular to his splayed legs, the other with his legs extending straight out from his sides.

After each display, Erik would hop up with the same Buster Keaton deadpan and look down at his stocking feet, too shy to accept the adulation that was starting to come his way.

"Erik the Amazing Elastic Boy will now put both of his ankles behind his head and walk on his hands," said Erik's emcees.

This was the showstopper. Erik sat on the floor, and as we all sat gawking, slowly and carefully tucked one ankle behind his head, and then—drumroll, please—the other ankle disappeared. With his head framed by the diamond of his inverted legs, Erik walked around the stage on his hands.

"Erik! Erik! Erik!" the kids in the audience chanted.

Maybe it was just me, maybe it was the excitement of the moment, but it didn't seem hard to imagine this portrait of Erik, caught in his own homemade frame, hanging from the walls of Webster like that of some prestigious alum. It wasn't hard to imagine a whole gallery of elementary school kids, with their ankles locked behind their ears, walking Webster's halls on their hands like those movable portraits at Harry Potter's Hogwarts.

One of the great benefits of public education—as has often been stated—is the diversity of experience that comes to children in the system. In a country where the intersections of class and race, politics and religion, are growing increasingly rare, a city school makes the sort of democratic stew that we all love to say we relish.

But it isn't for everyone. Attending a city school requires flexibility, a willingness to bend and stretch and accommodate the dreams and aspirations of a host of others. When it works—when you get those corridors filled with amazing elastic kids—it does make a guy want to shout and stomp his feet. Or walk on his hands with his ankles tucked behind his ears. **MM**

Tim Brady is a writer who lives in St. Paul.