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Does 8th-Grade Pomp Fit the Circumstance?

By [JAN HOFFMAN](#)

IT is good to be 14 and graduating from eighth grade.

In the last few weeks at Community Middle School in Plainsboro, N.J., year-end activities have included a formal dance; the Cameo awards, an Oscars-like ceremony for students in the television and video production classes; a trip to Hersheypark in Pennsylvania; and a general awards assembly. On Thursday evening there was a salute to the entire class. On Friday, the class picnic.

Community Middle's veneration of its young teenagers is neither unique nor particularly excessive (the dance was in the gym). Across the country, in urban and suburban school districts, in rich communities and impoverished ones, eighth-grade celebrations now mimic high school or even college graduations: proms, the occasional limousine, renditions of "Pomp and Circumstance," dignitaries speechifying and students in caps and gowns loping across the stage for diplomas.

Andre Cowling, who just finished his first year as principal of [Harvard](#) Elementary, one of the poorest-performing schools in Chicago, said the South Side's eighth-grade celebrations are like "Easter Sunday on steroids."

In a speech last Sunday at a Chicago church, [Barack Obama](#) took on the pomp and purpose of these ceremonies. "Now hold on a second — this is just eighth grade," he said. "So, let's not go over the top. Let's not have a huge party. Let's just give them a handshake." He continued: "You're supposed to graduate from eighth grade."

Mr. Obama was wading into a simmering debate about eighth-grade ceremonies and their attendant hoopla. Do they inspire at-risk students to remain in high school and beyond? Or do they imply finality?

While some educators are grateful that notice is still being paid to academic achievement, others deride the festivities as overpraising what should be routine accomplishment. Some principals, school superintendents and legislators are trying to scale back the grandeur. But stepping between parents and ever-escalating celebrations of their children's achievements can be dicey, at best.

In many towns the sophistication and expense of the graduations are surging. The Internet teems with teenagers seeking comments about dresses and hairstyles for year-end events. Party planners, caterers and invitation designers market themselves for eighth-grade parties.

The students at the middle school in Briarcliff Manor, N.Y., an affluent community, enjoy a dinner cruise with a D.J. around Manhattan. And in the stricken schools of Chicago's South Side, Mr. Cowling said, "It's a big business event: everyone has on a new outfit, manicures, pedicures, the hair" for a ceremony that can last

two hours. “And then,” he said, “kids go to 5, 10 parties in the neighborhood, in hotels.”

Certainly, celebrations in many schools remain low-key. But increasingly, principals issue stern guidelines: no limousines; strapless, backless dresses at the formal only, not at the graduation itself.

“These events take on a legendary power that gets passed down from grade to grade, “ said Kay S. Hymowitz, a Manhattan Institute scholar who writes about family issues. “If last year’s parents thought of some new special treat, there’s no stopping it.”

The competitive materialism of the celebrations alarms educators like Mr. Cowling and Timothy Knowles, director of the [University of Chicago](#) Urban Education Institute. They also object, as did Mr. Obama, to the subliminal message of the ceremonies.

“Young adolescents are building identities,” said Dr. Knowles, who oversees four charter schools. “But they’re also really impressionable. So if the impression that’s left is that you have crossed the stage, the threshold, rather than, ‘You have made it halfway through the trajectory to college,’ then we risk those kids walking away from the ceremony thinking they have accomplished something — when they haven’t.”

The education scholar [Diane Ravitch](#) is more measured: “I don’t think anyone should say, ‘Hey, it’s only eighth grade.’ Lots of parents celebrate their kids’ accomplishments and we don’t say, ‘Hey, it’s only Little League.’ At least we have parents celebrating their children’s educational achievement. It says, ‘There are good rewards to staying in school.’ ”

Other principals say that the middle-school years have become a distinct period of maturation, worthy of recognition. “It acknowledges that students are uniquely different than students at high school and elementary school,” said Susan Howard, principal of Briarcliff Middle School. “We get little kids at the beginning of sixth grade and we graduate out young adults.”

And some students do deserve more than a handshake, said [Jonathan Zimmerman](#), a [New York University](#) professor who writes about American education. “There are kids for whom getting through eighth grade is a remarkable achievement: kids in foster care, the homeless kid who is constantly moving,” he said. “That kid should have a party.”

Marking eighth-grade graduation as a milestone is not novel: in previous generations schools urged parents to dress children nicely for the ceremony. Until the 1950s an eighth-grade education was an acceptable endpoint, qualifying many Americans for blue-collar jobs. But as the employment market shifted, the coin of the realm became a high school diploma. Sociologists noted the phenomenon of the high school dropout.

Modern eighth-grade graduations have become a tangle of outdated definitions of a successful education, inducements to remain in school, and contemporary values about self-esteem and enshrining a child’s many rites of passage. In some communities those rites begin with preschoolers wearing mortarboards. In their blow-out iterations, the eighth-grade bashes borrow from bar and bat mitzvahs for 13-year-olds, quinceañeras for Latina 15-year-olds and sweet 16 parties.

And while the culture pushes the commodification and sexualization of children at increasingly younger ages,

many parents wonder: what is left to distinguish high school graduation?

Mr. Cowling, a former Army captain who served in the first gulf war, just took over Harvard Elementary, where the high school graduation rate for its departing eighth graders has been about 37 percent. He does not dismiss the need for festivities. For many students, he said, this will be their last academic ceremony.

But he and other principals are trying to tweak the ceremonies, to push back against the outsize celebrations. This year he required eighth graders to research colleges and plan how to become eligible for admission. The ceremony itself, he told students, was about honoring their families. Next year, he said, the event will be called a transitioning ceremony, a term that is gaining traction as a rebranding of eighth-grade graduations.

Other terms include “stepping up” and “moving along.” In some schools, when a name is called the student stands, rather than crossing a stage.

In Arizona legislators have considered a bill for the last two years that would prohibit school districts from issuing eighth-grade certificates. Some legislators argued that the certificate was an important incentive, especially to recent immigrants. Others, supported by many Arizona business and educational associations, maintained that the certificate sent the wrong message: you’re done.

Deinstitutionalizing what has become an institution has its peculiar challenges. Michael Delahanty, superintendent of schools in Salem, N.H. (population 30,000), faced down about 40 parents in April as he announced that 2008 would be the final year for the ceremony known as eighth-grade graduation. Next year, he said, students would have a modest “transition” ceremony.

“One parent told me that Hallmark doesn’t make ‘transition’ cards,” Mr. Delahanty said.

And principals are striking their small blows against wretched excess. Two years ago at the class dance, a parent defied the “no limo” rule established by Seth Weitzman, principal of Hommocks Middle School in Larchmont, N.Y. So Dr. Weitzman directed the limousine to the rear of the building, where the child debarked. Unseen.

“Because the whole point of arriving in a limousine is to have people watch you,” he said.

The rule has been observed ever since, he added.

Ann Edwards, principal of the middle school in Rye, N.Y., another comfortable suburb, has tried to play down the event. “There is a need to mark ours,” she acknowledged. “So we call it class night,” which underscores its communal nature.

In that spirit, each student receives a rolled-up T-shirt that has been signed by all 235 classmates. No caps, no gowns. “I think there’s one graduation,” Dr. Edwards said. “High school. I don’t want to compete with that experience.”

The class used to hold an elegant dinner. “But the kids looked so awkward, it was so age-inappropriate, it was ridiculous,” Dr. Edwards said. Eighth graders now have a casual lunch.

This year some parents organized a semiformal dance for the students; others, a sprawling party. Dr. Edwards did not want the imprimatur of the school itself on those events.

She sighed. "We're fighting the culture of the communities in which we work," she said.

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