

The column in question: 'first school days'

Sept. 22, 1991

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This column written by Andy Rooney on Aug. 30 was distributed for publication on Sept. 5. It did not appear in the News. Rooney believes that readers, upon seeing the column in its entirety, will judge [him correct](#) in [his disagreement with Paul McNamara](#), editor of the News opinion pages.)

By Andy Rooney

Whatever age you are, it seems as if most people are your age. In Central Park, at a Paul Simon concert last month, the whole world seemed to be under 50. In parts of Florida, it seems as if everyone in the country is retired.

The world seems your age because you travel in your own circles and see your own friends. I'm sure kids across the country feel as though everyone's going back to school this week. College kids think everyone's going to college. We should all be so lucky.

Driving to work the day after Labor Day, I passed a grade school just before 9 o'clock. Mothers were hand-holding their children to the door. My mind went into fast rewind. You don't forget your first school days.

Before school opened, my mother always bought me new shoes, new pants, a new shirt and a sweater. I feel sorry for mothers who do not have the money to do that for their children because buying new clothes for the first day of school is one of the delights of being a parent and a child.

Mom also bought me crayons and a lined, yellow pad that said BEAVER on its cover. I think that was the company that made it. It was poor quality paper, but the pad cost only a nickel.

Even way back then in kindergarten and the first grade, I was aware that some kids were smarter than others. That fact poses one of the most difficult problems in all of education. The smart kids catch on right away and are ready to learn something new. The dumb kids don't get it and the teacher has to repeat and repeat the same lesson until the slowest kid in the class understands it and the smartest kids are bored.

In some schools, classes are divided into fast and slow sections. This has a way of permanently categorizing students, though – perhaps for life. Even so, there is no doubt in my mind that this is the right thing to do – except that I was one of the dumb kids in the second grade.

Yesterday, I read where the test scores of students in our schools are lower than ever. This doesn't appear to be the prospect in our family. I've tried to resist the role of proud grandfather, but last week I saw clear evidence that granddaughter Alexis, age 7, is far ahead of where I was as a writer in those BEAVER pad days.

Two weeks before she went into the second grade, Alexis was visiting us and she wrote half a dozen short stories one day. I kept the one she named "THE CLASSROOM BUM."

"Once there was a school and in it room 13 was going on a field trip. A kid had a fear of sharks. When they got there they saw many things. When they got to the sharks everyone was interested. The kid that had a fear of sharks fainted. The owner of the aquarium (sic) called the ambulance. Soon the kid was all better. When they got back they wrote all about the aquarium. The kid that fainted only wrote I hate sharks. The teacher said to write more. He wrote I hate the aquarium. The teacher kicked the kid out of school. The next day he wrote all about how he hated school."