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Families

**Giving thanks: While the thought is there,
teacher thank-yous often raise thorny issues**By [Stephanie Dunnwind](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter

For local teachers, end-of-the-year gifts from appreciative parents and children have ranged from a wrapped half-used bottle of Mom's perfume (discreetly returned) to handmade quilts with squares decorated by each **child** to Palm Pilots.

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With the school year coming to a close, lots of parents and classroom groups will be deciding whether or not to give teachers gifts.

"It's real common to get a handful of dandelions from the playground," said Margo Campbell, a former kindergarten teacher and Issaquah Education Association president.

While teachers say parents shouldn't feel obliged, they enjoy any token of gratitude, including simple notes of "this is what you meant to me."

"The truth is that they just really appreciate being remembered, no matter what," said Dan Peterson, principal of Shoreline's Meridian Park School.

Sally Simmons, who teaches first and second grades at Monroe Montessori, keeps a file of thank-you cards from parents. "If I ever feel like a bad teacher, I read over them again," she said.

Sure, teachers are paid for doing their jobs. But many parents want to acknowledge the personal bond that develops between **child** and teacher. They want to thank teachers for being a positive influence in their child's life eight hours a day, five days a week, for the past nine months.

"Personally, my philosophy is that teachers don't need any more coffee mugs or paper weights," said Lisa Bond, president of the Washington State PTA.

Instead, she recommends heartfelt letters from both parent and **child**, and participation in a group gift.

"I try to think, 'What would a teacher do with this?' " Bond said. "How much room do they have on their desk? At home, I figure they want to get away from their work."

Susan Ng, a room parent at Lockwood Elementary School in Bothell, tries to find class gifts that include creative contributions from all the children but also fit a teacher's interests or needs.

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When she noticed her daughter's kindergarten teacher didn't have a good place to sit during circle time, she painted an old chair donated by another parent and made a seat cushion decorated with each child's handprint.

Since her first-grade teacher loved to cook, Ng put together a cookbook with recipes and artwork contributed by each child's family. "It wasn't expensive at all," she said. The most time-consuming part was making copies, since all the parents ended up wanting one, too, she said.

Other gifts have included a bound book of poems by each **child**, an apron with children's handprints and a mirror surrounded by hand-painted tiles painted to hang above a classroom sink.

Some schools in wealthy neighborhoods have had to curb parents' year-end generosity.

For example, Bellevue's Cougar Ridge Elementary School, which is part of the Issaquah School District, issued guidelines to room parents requesting that group gifts be limited to a \$5 contribution per **child**. And everyone's name must go on the card, whether they donated or not, said Principal Patty Kirk.

However, some parents have given teachers computers and personal digital assistants, she said. In other wealthy areas, parents offered teachers vacation trips or payment for advanced degrees.

Even if parents have the best intentions, expensive gifts can put teachers in the awkward position of either having to decline a gift or worrying they could be accused of favoritism.

"Teachers do not want to be in the spot where a parent could say, 'I gave you that so my **child** should get a good grade,' " Kirk said. "They don't want to seem ungrateful, but parents don't always understand the ramifications."

Kindergarten through 12th-grade teachers do not fall under state's ethics and public-service act, said Brian Malarky, executive director of the Washington State Ethics Board. Each school district establishes its own rules, he said.

The statewide standard is that a gift from a person or group combined should not exceed \$50, Malarky said.

Most local district policies discourage gifts beyond letters of appreciation, copied to the superintendent. Auburn School District's policy, for example, frowns on routine presentation of gifts but notes that "should a student feel a spontaneous desire to present a gift to a staff member, the gift shall not be elaborate or unduly expensive."

Beyond the rules, it's just in good taste to avoid extravagant gifts, said Corinne Gregory, program director of The **Polite Child** in Woodinville.

"Too frequently these days, giving 'public' gifts like the one teachers get at the end of the year seems to become a game of one-upmanship," Gregory said. Instead, she suggests children make a homemade gift such as a picture, craft or cookies.

"The thought is where the value lies," Gregory said.

"Let the kids spend some time thinking about what they appreciated and how they might communicate that appreciation to their teacher. It's important that children learn to consider other people's feelings and do something that the other person would value."

Parents who want to make a significant donation should give to the school or a school program, rather than an individual teacher, said Mary Waggoner,

director of communications for the Issaquah School District.

Or parents can donate new items for the staff lounge.

Besides classroom teachers, school staff such as administrators, office staff, bus drivers, classroom aides and physical-education and music teachers, also appreciate being remembered, said Washington Education Association spokesman Rich Wood.

When asked, many teachers said their preferred gift is books for the classroom.

"Letting the student go to the bookstore and pick out books allows them to pick something that's appropriate for the class," explained Kari Westhusing, a fourth-grade teacher at Kokanee Elementary School in Woodinville.

"Plus, they get to see their gift being used every day by other students."

If a parent is willing to organize it, gifts from the whole class can be memorable keepsakes. Teachers also feel less awkward.

"I always tried to keep gifts low-key and not open individual presents when other kids were there," Campbell said.

"If parents go together and get something from the whole class, it's not so difficult because there's not a situation where some kids bring something and others don't."

Doug Fischer, a sixth-grade teacher at Westhill Elementary in Bothell, said he was "blown away" by a class gift last year, a baseball signed by Edgar Martinez.

"I will cherish the gift as a reminder of my great class and of the Mariners' magical season," he said.

However, parents shouldn't feel obligated to participate in a group gift if the amount makes them uncomfortable, Gregory said.

"There can be the temptation to present the teacher with a grand gift — one that may require \$20 or more from everyone in class," she said.

"If this amount is more than the parent can afford to give, or feels that the amount is generally too high, don't feel pressured to give in just because 'everyone else has.' Give what you can, or decline graciously and do an individual gift."

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