

Cafeteria Compromise

“...And so, when the Founding Fathers wanted change, they took it into their own hands and wrote the Declaration of Independence.” The prospect of lunchtime loomed eagerly above the heads of my little fourth grade class, but Mrs. Kate was not about to let us go without finishing the history lesson. Man, did she love history. Kids tapped their feet impatiently and rustled papers in their desks, but despite the constant noise and impatience, our teacher lectured on. I tried to listen- I really did- but my lunchbox beckoned from my corner cubby, and my pudding cup and sandwich seemed to call my name. Thomas Jefferson could declare all he wanted, but no parchment or old cursive could distract me from the prospect of the chocolatey goodness that sat just fifteen feet away.

Luckily, I didn't have to wait much longer. The bell rang just minutes later, and I jumped up and rushed to get in line by the door. Jenna slipped in line behind me and tapped my shoulder. “Are you gonna go to Abby's birthday party on Friday?” she squealed excitedly.

“Yes!” I giggled in anticipation. “My mom's taking me to get a present tomorrow. I'll have to tell you about it at lunch.”

Jenna made a face. “If we get seated by each other. And I have to go through the line, so we probably won't.”

That's right. The fateful lunchtime seating arrangement. I went to a relatively large elementary school, featuring classes that boasted 150 kids per grade. Naturally, the teachers and staff wanted to limit the volume in the cafeteria, so they decided to make students sit so that the boys sat on one side of the table and the girls on the other. Even worse, you had to sit as close to

the far end of the table as you could, in order of when you sat down. If you brought your own lunch, you sat down first. If you went through the line, you sat down last. Jenna was right- it didn't look like I would be sitting by her that day.

“That’s so lame,” I said disappointingly as the class walked out the door in a straight, single file line.

“Yeah,” agreed Jenna. “But what can you do?” Our teacher shushed us, and I thought about what she had said while we walked quietly down the long hallways. What could we do? We were just fourth graders, and the teachers strictly enforced every rule down to the letter. But as I sat down for lunch and dug into my pudding cup, I remembered what Mrs. Kate had said about the founding fathers. *They took it into their own hands.* As I recalled those lectured words, a seed of an idea began to sprout in my head.

The next day, I walked into class with a freshly printed paper with big, fancy lettering at the top. “We the students,” it proclaimed proudly, followed by a proposition of my own devising. My mom had helped me develop the idea and even typed it on the computer for formality. I had written a two hundred word request to let the fourth graders sit wherever they wanted at lunch, on a trial basis time of two weeks. After that time, I wrote, teachers could determine if we deserved the honor of having such freedoms. At recess, I brought my precious paper to the gym and passed it around to all my peers. “If we all sign it,” I explained, “They’ll have to listen to us!”

Jenna looked over my shoulder at the group of boys eagerly signing the page. “Do you actually think it’s going to work?” she asked, intrigued.

“What’s the worst that’s going to happen?” I laughed, handing a pen to a kid named Joey Richardson, who then proceeded to pull a John Hancock and sign his name in huge letters at the top of the page. By the end of our twenty five minutes of freedom, I had 73 whole signatures, and I couldn’t wait to show Mrs. Kate my hard work. Surely she would be proud of me for doing what the Founding Fathers did, right? It proved that I had listened to her informative (but boring) lectures, and even put them into practice. I had peacefully and respectfully organized a reasonable request- what wasn’t there to like?

The jump ropes and hula hoops were put away, and the classes trudged reluctantly to their class lines. Except for me- I marched triumphantly up to Mrs. Kate and handed her the paper. “We made a petition,” I said proudly. She took the paper curiously and scanned it. Her thin eyebrows furrowed, and the corner of her mouth turned down.

“I’m going to have to show this to Principal Dickenson,” she mumbled. I took a step back, confused. Was it really that good of a petition? Another teacher escorted us back to our classrooms, and Mrs. Kate disappeared around the corner. We arrived back at homeroom and went to our desks, and I soon became so preoccupied with my multiplication tables that I almost forgot about the whole ideal. Just when I was finishing the last page, our teacher reappeared.

“Joey?” she beckoned, waving the poor boy over to the doorway. “The principal would like to speak to you.” I looked from him to the doorway, my forehead creasing. Was this about the Declaration? Joey had signed awfully large- did my teacher think *he* wrote the petition? And more importantly- why was that a bad thing?

I didn’t have to wait long to find out. An announcement soon blared from the intercom, interrupting our daily math time. “All fourth grade students to the library. All fourth grade

students!” I exchanged a nervous glance with Jenna from across the room, and she shrugged helplessly. Nervously, I followed my classmates out the door. Despite Mrs. Kate’s shushings, a murmur of conversation ensued all the way to the wooden library doors. *What’s going on? Is Joey in trouble? Why do we all have to go?*

I slipped into a daze of confusion, and my heart thudded in my chest like a drum. We all sat down on the colorful rug, abuzz with nervousness and excitement. The principle stood at the front of the room with all five fourth grade teachers. Principle Dickenson’s stern eyes scanned the students as they took their seats. She sat perched in the librarian’s reading chair, and she held a single sheet of white paper.

“It has come to my attention that there have been some... *complaints* about the cafeteria seating arrangements,” she purred in a deep, sickly sweet tone and held up the paper-- *my* paper. “While this petition is impressive, I grant you, it is not appreciated by the staff of this school. They work very hard to ensure your success, and there is no time for silly games.” By then, beads of sweat perched from my forehead, and my eyes welled up with tears. What did she mean by silly games? Did I do something wrong?

“Now, we are willing to overlook this little mishap, provided the perpetrator come forward and apologize for creating such an uproar.” The principal smiled evilly, looking over the group of nervous nine-year olds with a slight smirk. “And see to it that this sort of thing does not happen again.” With that, she stood up, turned on her heels, and walked briskly out of the room. The library immediately erupted into chatter, but I couldn’t hear it. I was too astounded by what had happened. I was in *trouble*. The other students started to filter back towards class, and I walked guiltily up to Mrs. Kate.

“I wrote the petition,” I said quietly, and ran out before she could respond.

Luckily, I only had to suffer thirty more torturous minutes in that treacherous school, because I was so devastated that I could hardly focus. When my mom’s silver van pulled up in the school pick up line, I ran straight to the front seat and told her everything. Surprised at my sudden outburst, my mother listened intently the whole way home. I finished my story as she turned off the car’s ignition in our driveway, and she turned to look at me. “I think they could have handled that a lot better,” she said simply, pursing her lips together. Suddenly, I felt a lot better.

I woke up the next morning to find my mom at the computer, typing what looked like a very long and intense letter. “Who’s that for?” I asked, peeking at the contents.

My mom clicked the print button and smiled airily. “I thought I’d write a little note to Mrs. Dickenson!” she said brightly. “We’ve got a quick meeting with her this morning.”

Nothing about the letter seemed little, but my nervousness prevented me from saying so. “Is it about the petition?”

My mom grabbed the freshly printed pages and nodded. Sure enough, she marched into school with me that morning and firmly shook my principal’s hand as she entered the office. She then proceeded to sternly berate my principal for her management of my little declaration fiasco. I smiled as I listened to my mother explain that education was about application- something that I had put into practice with dignity and class. With every minute of the conversation, I felt a little bit better. I wasn’t in the wrong- the principal was! As my mother stood up to go, I let out a sigh of relief and smirked. Sometimes, I decided, I didn’t have to make my teachers proud. Inspiring my mother was much more rewarding.