

Remembering September 11th 25 Years Later

Today marks 25 years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Fifteen years ago, I reflected upon the 10th anniversary as if September 11th were a shared memory. Time has moved on, however, and I can no longer assume that collective memory. None of our students were alive when it happened; for them, it is an event in the pages of history. Even many of their parents and a few members of our staff were too young to have lasting memories of that day.

That passage of time makes it especially important that we continue to remember—not to frighten another generation, but to help them understand a day that profoundly affected our country and the world they inherited.

September 11, 2001, was about three weeks into my first year as principal of JFK. I remember learning that a plane had struck one of the Twin Towers. I initially assumed it had been an accident with a 2-4 seat propellor plane -- a terrible accident, but not a life-altering event for the nation. Something, however, seemed different about this situation, but I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

Our librarian and IT coordinator soon had a TV set up in the library. We then learned that a second plane had struck the other tower. These weren't small airplanes either; they were jet airliners.

We were under attack.

As the news unfolded, parents began calling to arrange to pick up their children early or change their after school transportation plans. There was worry in everyone's voices. Staff members were on edge as word spread. Students began to sense that something wasn't right, and we realized that we needed to say something to everyone in the building so the message would be consistent from one room -- and one person -- to another.

But what do you say in a building that has children ranging from three to fourteen years old?

We opted for a prayer over the PA system regarding a tragic plane crash. Throughout the day, several additional prayers were said as more information became known.

By the end of the day, I had written a quick half-page note to parents explaining what had been done at school and what students had been told. I remember concluding the letter by asking parents to give their children an extra hug that night.

The building emptied quickly that afternoon as families reunited and staff members left to be with their own loved ones. I remember thinking that all I really wanted to do myself was grab my kids, crawl into a hole with them, and hug them without ever letting go.

Things were eerily quiet as I sat in my office, which was located in what is now Mrs. Lundquist's classroom, and looked out the window. I watched a large plane flanked by fighter jets, travel from west to east across the south sky. It was Air Force One carrying President Bush back to Washington D.C. from an Air Force base near Omaha. There was something profound about seeing the only planes in the sky that afternoon.

That day gave the educational phrase *in loco parentis*—"in place of a parent"—a meaning that has remained with me throughout my years as principal. It may sound like a textbook phrase in theory, but it is a lived reality in practice.

When a child is panicking in the morning because they forgot their backpack, we are here. When a student's finger or tummy hurts and they don't know why, we are here. When they misbehave, as children sometimes do, and need to be corrected so they can learn, we are here. When they need help processing changes in friendships or the level of difficulty of their work, we are here.

In moments both ordinary and extraordinary, children need to know that they are cared for, protected, and not alone. When their parents cannot be here, we are here. That is what *in loco parentis* means.

Much has changed in 25 years. Our buildings are more secure, emergency procedures are more extensive, and an entire generation has grown up without personal memories of September 11th. What has not changed is our responsibility to care for one another.

Today, we remember those who lost their lives, those who ran toward danger to help others, the families whose lives were forever changed, and the many people who responded with courage, service, sacrifice, and prayer.

Today, we turn together toward prayer, gratitude, compassion, and peace as we help raise children to build a world in which love reigns.

Today, we give our children an extra hug.

