

# Outside the Box: Wisdom from the school bus

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While the first bell of the school day rang at 8 a.m., my “formal” education actually began at approximately 7:10 a.m. Monday through Friday as I climbed the stairs of the big yellow bus. The bus that ran the Quartz Creek route was a self-contained micro-community of 6- to

18-year-olds born into mostly blue-collar families who worked as ranchers, loggers, merchants or craftsmen.

The culture of our bus was based on a loosely defined caste system that was manifested mostly in seating order. Younger kids to the front, junior-high-age

students on the fringe of the back rows, and high-school types accessed the prime seats at the back of the bus. The gradual but sure exodus toward the back rows served as our shared rite of passage.

For some the ride from their front door to school lasted more than an hour each way, while those of us who were at the end of the route endured the hard, vinyl seats for about half that time. Nonetheless, there was plenty of time to absorb a number of life lessons.

Conversations were defined more or less by the section of the bus, but the discussion range was diverse and covered a wide swath of territory.

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## Leaders of all sorts might find a bit of inspiration from the lessons gained on a yellow bus traveling a rural road.

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On any one day there might be a heated debate as to the effectiveness of a BB gun in a mountain lion attack, a brainstorming session focused on the contents of the hotdogs served in the school cafeteria, the number of firecrackers required to pulverize a coffee can, a comparison of the strengths and weaknesses of every teacher in the system complete with horror stories about trips to the principal’s office, and, of course, several abridged versions of the facts of life.

Mind you, the vast majority of these conversations were based on young imaginations, fueled by myth and embellished by generations each attempting to outdo the previous. Sometimes the shared conclusions of the bus were in conflict with those found in our textbooks and classrooms. Naturally, this dissonance served to inspire even better bus discussions. In this process, we learned an invaluable lesson — filter information, pause and ponder before buying in, and, ultimately, don’t believe everything you hear.

Most of our trips back and forth to the hallowed halls of education were peaceful and filled with laughter. However, it was inevitable that at some point in time, conflict would arise, driven by a disagreement over disparate views concerning the veracity of the tooth fairy or some such earth-shattering debate.

Sometimes battle lines were drawn as someone challenged the status quo of the pecking order or when rivals in

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a teenage romance determined that a good fight was sure to impress. While our brotherhood of the bus was generally congenial, if you wanted a scrap, it could be found. Of course, there were always one or two kids who assumed the role of official pot stirrer.

The collective lesson from these experiences was that nowhere is it written that you have to accept every fight to which you get invited. Some took this lesson to heart early, while others learned it from a bloody nose or from the dreaded penalties at home when a parent received the call from the bus driver suggesting that, without remediation, a child was about to be “horseless.”

Given the mix of personalities on our bus, the age differences, the allure of being accepted into the inner circle of the back-of-the-bus gang, and the constant temptation to battle boredom with mischief, it was no wonder that value systems and boundaries of right and wrong were often tested.

We all learned a little something about choice and consequence (first encounters with chewing tobacco rarely ended well), having a friend’s back was paramount to maintaining credibility, recognizing when teasing was going too far, and stepping in to defend someone taught us empathy and kindness. We observed the multitude of strategies to deal with life’s ups and downs — some more effective than others.

The unstructured but critical education gained during our daily commute provided friendships, perspective, character growth, development of coping skills, and a book full of shared experiences. In consideration of every difficulty encountered since that time, nearly all resulted from a failure to apply lessons learned on a Bluebird bus. However, when diligently applied, those lessons — the thoughtful consideration of information, seeking solutions instead of conflict and sticking to core values have served us well. It occurs to me that leaders of all sorts might find a bit of inspiration from the lessons gained on a yellow bus traveling a rural road.



**Editor’s Note:** Tom Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln.



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