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Saved by the Tone

A school scuttles its commanding, clamoring bell in favor of an inviting, computerized ring tone.

By Erika Schickel

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AS OF LAST WEEK, the school bell is dead. At least it is at Canfield Avenue Elementary in L.A., where my daughter is in the third grade. Canfield is but one stop on the scheduled districtwide changeover to computerized ring tones. Now, instead of a sound reminiscent of the starting bell at Santa Anita, kids are summoned and dismissed by a cross between the wail of a Paris ambulance and the buzz when a Vegas slot machine pays off.

"We call it 'train arriving in station,' " said Tamara Gulatt, Canfield's principal. "We were given a choice between about six tones; this one was pretty much the most soothing."

"I hate it," my daughter, Georgia, declared. "It's creepy."

I'm with her. I find the sound slightly sad, at least in contrast to the happy clamor of the old bell. It makes me mournful, nostalgic.

This surprises me because, until last week, I thought I resented the school bell, with its Pavlovian overtones. I was vexed that my children's concentration should be so rudely shattered, the parts of their day framed by the jackhammering of clapper against steel. It seemed brutish and unenlightened. A sweet chirping would have been so much better. (Bird chirps, it seems, were not an option in the new tone system.)

As it turns out, chirp or bell, the Pavlovian response kicks in. In "Language Development From Birth to Age Three," Moïse Anisfeld tells us that "children start going back to their classes when they hear the school bell, not because of the acoustic properties of the sound of the bell but because of what the bell has come to mean for them." Now, instead of a shock to the aural system, our children are getting more of a sonic coaxing toward class.

I realize that, even if the old bell was a rude interruption, you don't know what you have till it's gone. A clanging bell can change from a brutish annoyance to a fond memory. Remember the final bell of the school year, dismissing us for summer vacation? It was one of the best sounds in the world; the giddy clamor of freedom.

I do realize that in light of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's school grab, and the ongoing grind of President Bush's educationally crippling No Child Left Behind policy, losing the bell is a relatively small matter. Still, Canfield's parent association is struggling to raise money to keep teachers' aides in the classrooms, so it's not nothing that the Los Angeles Unified School District is spending money changing its ring tones. But that's not really what has me upset.

The bell is quickly becoming an endangered sound. The jangle of telephones has been usurped by digital bleeps and tunes; church bells are now digitized, prerecorded gongs or a selection of inspirational songs. The dinner bell is a quaint memory for a few old-timers. I guess I'm just sorry to see another piece of the physical world disappear — the part where sounds are made by objects hitting each other. Something is slipping away, and I want to sound an alarm. I have to ask for whom the bell tolls.

All this also augers the death of a few good phrases, "saved by the bell" chief among them.

And what are we to now call this thing? Will teachers command their charges to line up when they hear the tone? Will tardy students have "missed the second tone?" It simply doesn't have the same ring.

Now, as students are graded on a bell curve, the shape will have scant meaning. And what is to become of "bells and whistles"? Whistles are also high on the endangered list.

Canfield's principal tells me that the neighborhood has welcomed the new tone. I suppose if I lived across the street from a school, the constant ringing would get pretty tiresome. I suppose a nice, soothing Euro-wail would be a welcome change, prompting me to get on board with the new world order. But I'll miss the school bell just because it was so ... well ... old school.

