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From Romper Room to the Rubber Room
By Andrew Malekoff

Among my earliest memories is watching black and white television shows like Ding Dong School and Romper Room. My father told me that Miss Frances, the teacher from Ding Dong School, used to come into the bar and grill that he managed in Newark, New Jersey. The bar was called the P.O.N., which is short for the Pride of Newark.

At the time I didn't understand why people went to a bar. Even though I couldn't figure it out, I had an even harder time understanding why Miss Frances would go there since in those days the bar was occupied for the most part by men sitting on stools. And, it smelled of beer. Oh yeah, and there were spittoons under each stool. I didn't understand that either. I could not figure out what she was doing at the P.O.N. After all, at the time she was the most famous nursery school teacher in the world.

I must admit that although I know a lot more now than I did when I was a child, there are still lots of things that I do not understand. For example, recently I was involved in a conversation with a few colleagues and one of them referred to a place called "the Rubber Room" where specially selected New York City school teachers sit.

Have you ever been a part of a conversation when everyone else seems to be clued in except for you? That was me. So I set out to do some homework. I discovered that the Rubber Room is where hundreds of New York City school teachers report to every day. They are teachers that are accused of some sort of misconduct and are deemed unfit to teach. Their teaching privileges are withdrawn until an adjudication process is exhausted. So, they sit in a room and get paid full salary to do nothing at a cost of over 35 million dollars a year.

I learned that there is no official place called the Rubber Room that you can find in any school directory. The origin of the name seems to be linked to the fact that some of its inhabitants may have emotional problems or are at risk of being driven mad by sitting idle and rendered useless in such a place for months and sometimes years.

I have not found a Rubber Room on Long Island. Although I imagine that there are Long Island residents that teach in the city and sit in a Rubber Room. There is a neat website: www.rubberroommovie.com that provides some Rubber Room facts. Here is a sample from the website.

- *How long do teachers spend there?* It can be months, although some have spent 8 to 10 years in the Rubber Room.
- *How does someone get out?* There is a hearing, like a trial, that determines their guilt or innocence and that leads to termination or a return to the classroom.

- *Is it pleasant?* Some complain of an unhealthy, volatile and even dangerous atmosphere where overcrowding, depression, screaming and even fights over chairs and tables are commonplace.

How can it be that in the 21st century such a place exists in a neighboring school system?

Really smart and dedicated educators spend a great deal of time figuring out how to take care of our children and make sure that they have the proper setting, instruction and support to optimize their academic and social-emotional development. Yet, just footsteps beyond the Nassau-Queens border we discover a world apart, a throwback to the dungeons of medieval times.

I wonder what Miss Frances would do if she had to sit in the Rubber Room? Could it be that in her later years that that is why she often visited the P.O.N?