



Talk to Students for an Inside Look at High School Life

Statistics can tell part of the story, but personal interviews capture a complex subject best.

By Jay Mathews

In many ways, high schools are harder to cover intelligently than any other kind of public school. This is particularly true when reporters are trying to determine whether the teaching is engaging and rigorous.

For one thing, high school classes run the gamut in subject matter and instructional style. An American history teacher in one classroom might give A's for reviewing movies with Washington themes, while his colleague next door demands a weekly 10-page paper on constitutional inconsistencies and never gives more than a B-plus.

There are statistical ways to determine which high schools are better than others in challenging students and preparing them for college. I calculate Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate test participation rates with something I call the Challenge Index. You can also use the College Board's Equity and Excellence percentage for each school, showing what portion of its senior class received passing grades on AP exams. It is theoretically possible, although few people have ever tried it, to gauge the quality of individual AP teachers by inspecting the subject-by-subject breakdown of AP results on the annual grade report the school receives from the College Board.

But journalism should be more about people than numbers. In that search for human stories, high schools have one very useful feature: plenty of thoughtful and observant students. I cannot overemphasize the importance of making contact with these young people. No matter what has drawn you to a school, look for a chance to sit down with a tape recorder and let the objects of all that teaching tell you what they know.

Students can easily identify which teachers are best. Armed with those recommendations, you can sit in good teachers' classrooms and take notes on their tough questions, challenging assignments, and helpful insights. Students can also tell which teachers are the worst, but catching those instructors being inattentive and cruel and wrong and lazy is not so easy. They will often let you sit in their classes, and you can sometimes catch revealing moments. But the best stories about bad teachers come from interviews with their students.

When I was hanging around Mamaroneck High School in the suburbs north of New York City in the 1990s, I checked in regularly with Joy Sarlo. She was

not a leading scholar by any measure, but she knew that school. She was a cheerleader, a lifeguard and a student of human nature. She was the one who told me about the course in which she got a good grade for doing no work at all.

The class was Art and Studio Photography. The teacher never took attendance. Sarlo said she appeared in that class only four or five times that semester, but her report card showed only two absences. She got the impression that the only assignment on which she would be graded was a photo essay at the end of the semester. When she made a rare appearance in class on the last day of the term to hand in her project, the



teacher was nowhere to be found. She turned in nothing, confident that would not be a problem. Sure enough, her report card revealed that in Art and Studio Photography she had gotten an 85 – a nice, solid B.

Of course to gain the best access to these interesting people, you have to get into the school. Many districts are leery of reporters spending days or weeks in classrooms. But it is not as difficult to arrange as many think.

The key is the principal. Pick a school that interests you, find out what the school is doing right – every school has something to brag about – and tell the principal, during an interview in which you get his or her life story, that you would like to see this strong program in action. That is usually all it takes. [CONT NUED NEXT PAGE](#)



That school's strong point – whether it is a good drama curriculum, a strong reading teacher team, an award-winning foreign language department or something else – can be made part of a larger story of how such teaching is being done in your area, and in the country. It is enough to persuade the principal, and your editor, that you are pursuing a worthwhile story.

But don't limit yourself to that topic. As you interview the principal, teachers, students and parents, ask them about their lives and see what they think is most interesting about that school. You will collect more story ideas that way than you can ever use.

For me, sitting in class does not inspire as many publishable articles as long interviews with students and teachers. What you see and hear is often uninteresting to readers, although in some cases with the proper context you can develop news stories. In one Northern Virginia high school, while doing a story on how good students were treated differently at different schools, I saw a teacher tell her class to start grading each other's essay assignments. This was my first exposure to the controversial practice of peer editing, which produced a front-page story. While watching an English class in suburban Maryland for a story about Advanced Placement, I saw the teacher begin to diagram a sentence on the board, a teaching practice I thought had died years before. The young teacher explained to me why she had reverted to this old-fashioned method, yielding another good story.

And I found one of my best stories – one that personalized the issue of challenging classes that has long been my focus – reading a student newspaper, which can be an excellent source. Angry student editorials are particularly fertile ground. If something bothers a student editor, there is a good chance that it will also bother your readers.

“*For me, sitting in class does not inspire as many publishable articles as long interviews with students and teachers.*”

The editorial that caught my eye was in Mamaroneck High School's newspaper, the *Globe*. It decried rules that required students to get a certain grade in a prerequisite course before they could take an AP course. I asked David Abramowicz, the student who wrote the piece, if he had a particular case in mind. He told me about Kerry Constable, a senior who had been barred from taking AP U.S. History because of bad grades her sophomore year. She had studied for the AP exam on her own and gotten a passing score, a startling turn of events that undermined the school's assumptions about who was ready for AP and who was not.

I confirmed what had happened in long interviews with Kerry and with the chairman of the social studies department, a fine teacher whose class I had observed many times. He thought the policy was right, and that Kerry's bad grade in 10th grade meant AP history was not for her. Her unusual persistence proved him wrong.

That was a story that people would read and remember, and often ask me about. Readers could see themselves, or their children, in Kerry, a gutsy teenager who wanted to make a point. I had all sorts of statistics that showed that Mamaroneck's policy did not make much sense, but I needed a story about a real person. I could not get that until I was inside the school, talking to everyone and letting them tell me what was really going on. ■



Jay Mathews, a Washington Post education reporter, writes the weekly “Class Struggle” column for washingtonpost.com. He also covers school issues in a quarterly column for *The Post Magazine*. Mathews has written three books about high schools and is finishing one on middle schools in the inner city.