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ENGL 165

Personal Essay

Is It Really the Best High School in the Nation?

My high school experience was much different than most people my age. Instead of the normal four year stint, I stayed for only three and still got my advanced diploma. I was part of a graduating class that I did not belong in and one in which I hardly knew any of the individuals I walked across the stage with.

I went to a large school in the suburbs (think Levittown after World War II) where a majority of the families from the school were very affluent. On paper, we looked like the perfect school. We had the best test scores and graduation rates in the county. Our slogan was even “the best high school in the nation”, when in reality, we were 987. Students’ parents would buy them the most expensive things possible to show status. Students drove to school in Porsches, brand new Jeeps and sported Supreme and Gucci items. Another accessory many students had readily available were drugs, one of the biggest problems that my school faced. I was disgusted by the students, and their attitudes of entitlement and disrespect. Friends were based on wealth and possessions, not on personality.

To say the least, I didn't fit in. My family lived in a nice house but in comparison to the multimillion, four story “McMansions” that everyone else lived in, it was small. I carpooled with my neighbor to school every day in her Honda...not a shing, new one. Our ride was an old, broken hand-me-down. With chipping paint that had been bleached by the sun, dents from hitting trees and other cars that resembled craters on the moon, we definitely weren't making a

statement as we pulled into the lot each day. Well, not the RIGHT statement. Unlike the excessive clothing worn by my peers, I shopped at Target and Old Navy with confidence. I liked my look...even if it didn't have a Gucci or Lilly Pulitzer tag attached to it.

In addition to the social issues, the school as a whole was broken. During my first two years there, our principal was like a mythical creature. I truly had only seen her once in all the days I had spent in the building. No one seemed to know who she was. She never walked the halls or spoke to students. She remained hidden in her office, leaving all the work to the teachers and grade level administrators. My school made the news regularly: rape on campus, drug busts, expensive cars being totalled in the parking lot by students, and more.

During my freshman year at school, I was pulled out of class and into the hallway, where I was discretely asked by an administrator for that grade level if I felt safe and welcome at my school. Before I could even think, I was answering her. I replied quickly with "No...not no, but hell no." I told the truth—we were overcrowded, teachers had no authority, there were drugs everywhere and nothing was being done to make it any better. I ranted on about how the administration had failed us as students because they swept the problems under a rug instead of addressing them. After picking her chin up off the floor, she quickly turned sour and sent me back into the classroom, rather than discussing my answer.

At the beginning of my senior year, a new principal arrived. He came into a broken system, replacing a negligent principal. His main goal was to keep the school out of the news for negative things and hide what was wrong with the award winning school. He made sure the only things in the news were about our winning sports teams and high test scores. He, much like his predecessor, spent most of his time in his office and did little to nothing about the serious

problems the school faced such as drugs and suicides. He walked the halls daily, but didn't bat an eye at the dress code infractions (think Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* BEFORE meeting Richard Gere) or the foul language echoing through the halls in between classes.

It was easy to have the best test scores when teachers held your hand, like parents with a toddler at the park. We had a "no zero policy", where you could never be given a zero even if you didn't do the work. There was also homework recovery, where you could turn homework in from the beginning of the semester all the way to the end. These policies kept grades up, with little work being done by students, and no accountability for not studying or completing assignments. In addition, teachers never gave many assignments to do. For everyone there, high school was a breeze! AP and dual enrollment courses were the only classes that provided any challenges and I took those as often as possible. In the rapidly growing area that I live in, people paid way more than necessary to live in the area just to get their kids into this "incredible" high school district because of its' award winning status and soaring test scores. Being new to the state and not knowing any better, my family was duped too as we built a home only 2.5 miles away from the school. We did not know about the problems until after moving and beginning school there and by then, it was too late.

Students either loved the school or despised it... I was in the latter group. During my sophomore year, I really began disliking the people I was surrounded by. I was disgusted by the ways they acted, the things they said and the overwhelming sense of entitlement and invincibility. At this point, the only challenge I faced was getting out of bed each day and going to school. The severe lack of challenges that I faced in the curriculum I was learning was equally frustrating. I took all the AP and Honors classes that I could fit into my schedule. I began to

discuss my options with my counselor, who disliked the idea that I would want to leave a year early. She knew there were problems with the school but knew better than to draw attention. She needed to keep her job and not make waves. She felt that I would do better to “stick it out” for one more year so I had more time to mature before college. I disagreed. I began planning my classes to get out of high school as fast as humanly possible. If I had not wanted an advanced diploma, I could have graduated that year, at age 15. I had already completed 4 years of Spanish to meet the requirements for the advanced diploma, I knew to stay on. When planning my classes, I needed to get recommendations from teachers. As I met with one particular English teacher, she told me that I could never graduate early. She didn’t stop there! She continued to predict that if I did, I would fail out of college in my first semester. It was this conversation that sparked a fire and I made my final decision to leave high school early. If a teacher really believed that and didn’t believe in me, did they really do their job well? I knew I could do it. I WOULD graduate early and I WOULD do well in college to show my teacher and anyone else who doubted me.

While I had many issues with the school, my biggest fear was that our experience there left us unprepared for college and outside world. Many “A” students depended on teachers completely to get the grades they wanted. I can’t count the times in class that I witnessed a student arguing with a teacher over the grade they received. The teachers would always raise the white flag in defeat and raised the score to what the student desired. Most of my teachers did not actually teach us. They were more or less glorified babysitters, and they were terrible with that job too as I witnessed drug deals in classes daily. I can vividly recall knocking on the grade level administrator’s office door to tell her what I had seen happen during my geometry class. I gave

her the first and last names of those involved, what drugs were sold and the money amount exchanged and exactly when and where it happened. I was dismissed and sent back to class with no questions asked and no follow up. The real shocker was that this particular drug transaction was by one of the biggest dealers in the school...our SGA President.

I began my senior year trying to avoid the topic of me graduating early. I never talked about it to other students, trying to stay out of the spotlight. I kept my head down, went to class, came home, did homework all afternoon, went to sleep, and repeated it. During the school year, numerous threats from the administration in attempts to keep us in line. Our Prom and Post Prom events were threatened to be cancelled. The students called their bluff though. Realizing that thousands of dollars had been spent for each event, they knew that the administration was all talk. There were fights every week and drugs were rampant. Crammed in like sardines, we were over capacity with not enough tables and chairs or classrooms. We had enormous class sizes, not enough teachers, and so few classrooms that some even had to be held in the cafeteria. Nothing was being done about any of the issues...we were a top testing school with a fantastic sports program. That is all that mattered. We were out of the news, out of sight, and out of mind.

Teachers pushed us through their classes just like they had in previous years, giving way too many chances and holding hands. Grades were given, not earned. As long as a student showed minimal effort, that student "earned" a B. I worked extremely hard in all my classes and earned the grades I was given, but many of my peers didn't even bother to try. In their minds, they could be as disrespectful as they wanted to be and not do any of their work because they had already gotten into their desired colleges. They didn't bother to apply for scholarships because their parents would pay for all costs at the college of their choice. While I worked an after

school job to pay for things I wanted, they spent all their time at parties and racing on the back roads in their giant trucks and expensive cars.

While coasting through high school, what my peers failed to realize was how much they would struggle when they got to college. Although we are only in the spring semester of our freshman year of college, I can name at least ten people that I graduated with that have dropped out of college already. High school had not prepared them for actually having to study, work, and complete assignments to gain their grades. Unlike my peers, I came to college well prepared because I had to work so hard to get out of high school early. I had already created good study habits and time management skills to help with the workload. I knew how to work hard for good grades, unlike most of my graduating class.

As I sit and reflect on my high school experience, I realize that it was far from the “best time of my life.” When I entered high school, I loved to read and learn. When I left, my love had dwindled. My experience there made it very difficult for me to make friends and get close to others. I am the epitome of social awkwardness. However, I want to thank high school. It forced me to work hard and earn good grades. It gave me the drive to continue on and not peak in high school like so many of my peers. I have a plan for my college life and what I am going to do after with my life. Most of all, my high school and my experiences there made me want to graduate early and I succeeded when others said I could not. Moreover, I am succeeding in college. I am on the Dean’s List for my grades and in a national honor society. I joined a sorority and have made many friends at Longwood. My high school made me want a different experience while in college. For that, I will forever be grateful.