
What I Wish I Had Known as an Education Reporter

One year of teaching in a Philadelphia middle school provides an unforgettable lesson.

By Christina Asquith

I would never let a reporter in my classroom.

That traitorous thought coursed through my brain as 32 sixth-graders ran all over me. As a reporter, I had begged to observe classrooms. Now, as a teacher, I could only imagine some journalist's cold-hearted portrayal of my classroom chaos. My first lesson of the year: Be more empathetic to teachers.

Most journalists who have covered the education beat have wondered what it would be like to turn the tables. Several years ago, I left my career as a newspaper reporter to teach inside Philadelphia's lowest-ranked middle school and ended up learning a lot about education and education reporting.



Christina Asquith and her sixth-grade class at Julia de Burgos Bilingual Middle Magnet School in Philadelphia.

I was 26 years old at the time and in a two-year writing program at the Philadelphia Inquirer. I covered 27 townships in the suburbs, filing daily stories on police, courts, suburban sprawl and a school system that was struggling to deal with an influx of Spanish-speaking immigrant children.

Eager to weigh in on the schools issue, I had observed a few bilingual classes. But the measures of success or failure were a mystery. As my two-year program drew to a close, I heard about Philadelphia's emergency certification program. Individuals with bachelor's degrees, but no experience or teacher training, were being recruited to fill the hundreds of vacancies in the toughest schools.

This was my chance to get closer to the story. Why were inner-city schools failing? What would I learn about the beat from stepping into it? And could one

earnest, idealistic teacher (me) make a difference? I made an inquiry and six weeks later was tossed classroom keys, without much of an idea what or how to teach.

My assigned school was Julia de Burgos Bilingual Middle Magnet School, a century-old stone building covered with graffiti and barbed wire in a troubled North Philadelphia Hispanic neighborhood. I was fluent in Spanish, and had spent a year abroad in Chile, so they assigned me to teach English, social studies and reading to sixth-grade English-language learners. My students were nearly all of Puerto Rican descent, with names like Yahaira, "Big Bird," and Ernesto. One-third of the class spoke almost no English. They arrived on the first brisk September morning wearing puffy jackets, gold jewelry, and slicked-back hair, and seemed very respectful.

The teachers, on the other hand, were wary of me, not out of fear that I was on an "undercover" assignment, as I had expected, but out of a cynical belief that I would probably quit before Halloween. Why bother getting to know another revolving-door rookie? Indeed, as I would later learn, new teachers typically do quit quickly. On average in the United States, one-third of new teachers leave urban schools within three years. In the 1999-2000 Philadelphia school year, 10 percent of the new hires – 100 teachers – quit in September alone. Our school started the year with nine vacancies, and the principal was the school's third in four years. At de Burgos, a handful of teachers quit in the middle of the year, and several more quit or transferred at the end.

As a reporter, teacher attrition had been a pretty mind-numbing statistic. But as a teacher, I experienced firsthand the devastating reality behind the numbers: classrooms without teachers and new arrivals like me with no books or curriculum to teach from because no one had ordered them the previous spring. Many special education students – the neediest of all – spent the entire school year with rotating substitutes.

It often took the Philadelphia school bureaucracy until well into September to make teacher assignments due to union regulations, so new teachers had no time to prepare. Teachers cynically called these late appointments the "Labor Day surprise." Who would the principal be? Would we have English and math CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

teachers? Who knows! We had to see who showed up on the first day. We did everything on the fly.

Needless to say, very little learning went on in this environment.

Middle school classrooms are particularly hard to fill because teachers know that children from 12 to 15 are at their most rebellious and disrespectful. Young adolescents are moody and susceptible to peer pressure and bullying. At the same time, these are the years students are expected to master abstract math concepts and complex ideas in their other subjects. But many middle school teachers, especially those in poor urban areas, lack expertise in the subject they are teaching.

So, when observing a school, especially a high-poverty school, look for ways to measure not just the students, but the teaching corps. Ask about the school's attrition rate. (More than 8 percent is worrisome.) Are most teachers certified in their subjects? Is there an ongoing teacher training program? How are good teachers recognized? Good schools have good answers. And always follow up your classroom visits by interviewing the teacher about what you've seen.

While reporters should be sensitive to not measure a teacher's effectiveness by one visit alone, there are tell-tale signs of an unhappy classroom:

- Are the students being rude to the teacher? Students are very aware of the presence of an outsider, and will try to embarrass a teacher they don't like. Conversely, if they like the teacher, they will express their loyalty by being better behaved than usual.
- Can the teacher get the class on task within the first two minutes of the bell ringing? If the students' milling around and chatting eats into class time, the teacher probably also takes a casual attitude to their learning.
- Are three to five classroom procedures or rules displayed prominently? This is Effective Teaching 101. I would consider bare walls a sign of teacher incompetence.

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- Is the objective of that class stated and obvious? Many teachers plow through activities just to fill their 40 minutes. Ask yourself at the end of the class: What were the students supposed to be learning that period? If you can't answer, the students probably can't either.

Always be aware that going into a teacher's classroom to observe is a lot like going to a person's house for dinner. Even if this person typically eats takeout in front of the TV, she will probably pull out the nice china, cook something impressive, and behave politely for you.

Similarly, school districts and teachers go to extraordinary lengths to prepare for outsiders who they know are there to judge them. At my school, when the principal knew an outsider would be coming into the building, she told the worst-behaving kids to stay at home and put the students without teachers into other classrooms. Teachers also knew that if they tried to expose the school's shortcomings they would be punished.

Most schools probably aren't as deceitful as the one in my experience. But, if you have only a short time to spend in a classroom, you need to be aware that there is likely to be some effort to orchestrate what you see. The most useful thing to get out of the experience is probably the teacher's trust and home phone number. Then offer to take her out for coffee sometime to pick her brain. When you can't be in a school yourself over an extended period, developing a trusted source who is inside on a daily basis is the best way to truly get the best stories. ■



Christina Asquith spent 18 months working and traveling in Iraq, where she wrote about the rebuilding of higher education in Iraq for the New York Times and other publications. Her book, “Emergency Teacher: The Inspirational Story of a New Teacher in an Inner-City School,” was published this year by Skyhorse Publishing. Asquith is currently working on a book about women in Iraq.