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My Time at Classic City High School

Every Friday morning during the spring 2019 semester, I was at Classic City High School in Mrs. Johns' first and second period classes. Over the course of the semester, I got to know Mrs. Johns and her ninth and tenth grade English students, who were always very excited to get to talk to the tutors and were, for the most part, very motivated to learn and do the work the best they could.

I. The Institution

Classic City is a non-traditional high school in Athens, GA. From the first time I walked into the school, I was struck by how different it was from my high school. My high school was very focused on face-to-face instruction and was not at all dependent on computers or online learning, unlike Classic City. From what I understood, most students at Classic City go to that high school over Clarke Central or Cedar Shoals because they do better in a more individualized environment than a more traditional high school, where everything is focused on the class itself and for the most part, each class consists of sitting at a desk and listening to the teacher for 50 minutes at a time.

Another thing that struck me right from the beginning was the size of the student body and how that translated into class sizes. My high school was extremely overcrowded and had a total student body of over 2400 students. I graduated with more than 550 students in my class and each of my classes had at least 25 students in them, some even reaching 31 students in one

classroom. Going into working at Classic City, I knew it was much smaller than my high school and the other two high schools in Athens, but until I was actually in the school I never thought about how much smaller it really was. Both Mrs. Johns' first and second period classes had about eight students in them when the entire class was there. I also saw a program from a previous year's graduation and there seemed to be about fifteen students total graduating that year. To me, the smaller class sizes seemed to be the best part about attending Classic City because it was clear that everyone who goes there are all very close and are all good friends; it also allowed Mrs. Johns to work better with each of her students and be more in tune with what they needed and how best to help them.

Technology was also a big part of what makes Classic City so different from most other high schools, mine included. It clearly plays a big part in instruction and it seemed like many students had classes that were solely on the computer. I didn't count how many computers there were in Mrs. Johns' classroom, but it was easily twenty based on how many were left open, even when everyone in her class was on a computer. Her first and second periods were both English classes which seemed to be split between face-to-face and on the computer, but I know her fourth period class was a lab class. The lab classes sounded like she had students come in and work solely on the computer. She had papers up in her classroom saying a student passed chemistry and she had signed off to prove it, so clearly these lab classes weren't related to the teacher's subject area and they needed to do was unlock different tests and tasks for students until they passed that class. They also have a program at Classic City for credit recovery that seems to be all online, as well. Beyond computers in the classroom, the way personal technology was dealt with at Classic City was very odd to me. Mrs. Johns had many signs up in her classroom about how cell phones weren't allowed, yet the students weren't shy about constantly being on their phones. They

would always have headphones in, even if they were supposed to be listening to her or were taking a test. I worked with a couple different students who wouldn't take their headphones out even if I was working one-on-one with them, which was very weird to me as that was not at all how it was at my school. One of my teachers my senior year was so against cell phones in class that he had pre-filled out referrals about phones and had them hanging on his wall just waiting to have a student's name filled in.

II. The Teachers and Administrators

The only teacher I got to know at Classic City was Mrs. Johns, but she is absolutely a phenomenal teacher who truly cares about her students and wants to see them succeed. She didn't originally graduate with a teaching degree. She first graduated with a B.A. in English from UGA and then went back and got her masters in mass communication from Grady. I actually think her MAT was her third degree, which is interesting since she clearly could've done anything but chose to become a teacher.

Mrs. Johns was very good at keeping the tutors involved and engaged in what the class was working on and was very good at making us feel like we were being utilized instead of just sitting there waiting for someone to raise their hand. She was also very good at not making it a big deal if a student really did need help or needed someone to work with him. If the students were working on an essay or something on the computer she would sometimes pair me up with one of them so that way I could help them articulate their ideas or even just help with spelling, but she never did it in a way that would make that student feel embarrassed or shut down because they were working with a tutor. She was always very professional and patient with the tutors and was always willing to work with us and talk with us about what she's done and been through as a teacher. It was very refreshing and really nice to hear about her time as a teacher and hear her

she speak honestly about it; she clearly wasn't trying to convince us that being a teacher was the best or worst job in the world, as many teachers do when someone talks to them about it.

She was also very good at knowing her students and knowing how best to get them to work; whenever she gave an assignment that they were supposed to work on individually she always went around and would check in with each student and see if there was anything she or I could do to help them if they needed it, yet she never hovered and was never pushy. If she handed out an assignment and a student was clearly not working on it, she would make it a point to go over and talk with that student and never tried to force a student to do anything but just tried to encourage him or her to do it, and almost all of those times when she walked away, that student would start working on whatever she had given out.

More than anything, Mrs. Johns just wanted to see her students learn and succeed and went above and beyond to give them opportunities to do that. She regularly gave students the chance to do work they may not have done originally, she let them have extra time to complete assignments, and she was always very willing to work with and help any student who came to her. All of the extra stuff she was doing for her students was all just extra work and more grading that she was going to have to do but she was always willing to do that and go above and beyond for her students which I just found to be very inspirational for my future career as an English teacher.

I didn't talk to many administrators in my time at Classic City, but in my interactions with the secretary at the front desk and Mrs. Hamilton, the graduation coach, I think it's amazing that they are able to not only know the students, but also have a relationship with them. I remember there was a day I was signing into the volunteer book in the front office and a boy was checking in late and was talking to the woman at the front desk. She not only knew his name, but was

asking him how his job was going and if he liked it or not. I just thought that was amazing because at my high school, I highly doubt anyone outside of my teachers were able to pick me out of a crowd as someone who even went to North Forsyth, let alone know enough about me to ask about anything I was involved in outside of school.

III. The Students

Over the time I spent at the high school, I worked with lots of different students. I never had one certain student that Mrs. Johns would pair me with every week I was there. I'm glad that I was able to work with lots of different students, but I do wish I was able to build more of a relationship with them as I would've been able to if I worked with just one student throughout the semester. There were a few students that stood out to me in my time there.

One student was in Mrs. Johns' tenth grade English class. She was a 16-year-old African American. She was consistently there and one of the only students in the class who would participate regularly. She was very bright and clearly loved learning but she was always willing to ask for help when she needed it. I always looked forward to working with her because of how eager she was to learn and do the best that she could. She had a twin that would come in during first period sometimes just to hang out and seeing the two of them interact was always so fun to watch and laugh with them. She was clearly a leader within the classroom and everyone looked up to her and listened to her; she was a very good influence on her friends. She told me she wants to be a doctor one day and I truly believe she will be able to accomplish that goal.

I also worked a lot with a Hispanic girl who was also in Mrs. Johns' first period. We worked together a lot on essays and presentations as it seemed that she was still struggling with English and all the strange grammar rules that come with it. There were times where I could definitely tell she was getting frustrated and discouraged with herself and her writing, but I did my best to

work through that with her and encourage her. She was very quiet and seemed to keep to herself most of the time, but she had a lot of really great ideas. We bonded over shoes and clothes and she told me that she wants to be a hairstylist or makeup artist when she grows up, and I think she would be amazing at that.

IV. Conclusion

My time at Classic City High School was something I know will stay with me throughout my career as an educator. Prior to volunteering here, I had only had experience with elementary school aged kids in the Athens area, and before that only mainly white students who came from the same background as me. This experience has really opened my eyes to what high schoolers, who are the age group that I hope to teach, go through, and more specifically what students in these situations go through. I also was able to learn hands-on beside Mrs. Johns, who I know will be an inspiration to me throughout my teaching career. If one day I'm half as amazing of a teacher as she is, I'll be in pretty good shape. Because of having the opportunity to work one-on-one with these students, I am more understanding, patient, and supportive, all of which will be wonderful things for me to carry into my classroom and the rest of my life.