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My Experiences at Classic City High School

*To protect students' identities, all names have been anonymized.

The Institution

Before beginning my mentoring, my initial impressions of Classic City were admittedly negative. For two weeks, Mrs. Hamilton and I exchanged emails regarding my registration papers, but I had still not been cleared. I drove to the school to try to solve the issue in person, and I was fortunately able to find the woman in charge of security and get everything arranged. When I arrived for my first day only to be turned away because Mrs. Hamilton was absent, I became even more concerned about how this next month of mentoring would go. Despite the slow start, my experiences at Classic City would end up being very positive from this point on.

I admit that I was not expecting a very nice institution for an alternative school due to budgeting, but Classic City surprised me. I noticed right away that the building seemed new, clean, and somewhat secure; one notable feature is that the main office is not accessible without an administrator pushing a button to unlock the door. I greeted the friendly secretary at the front desk and walked through the halls to Mrs. Kaiser's classroom, where I noticed that the student population was a lot smaller than I expected; only a few students roamed the hallways in the

minutes leading up to the first bell. The teachers stood outside of their classrooms, greeting everyone who walked by.

I had already heard rumors from my classmates in our LLED class that some drama had occurred with Mrs. Kaiser. When I arrived to her classroom to find that Mrs. Hamilton was the full-time teacher and not just a substitute, I learned that Mrs. Kaiser had ungracefully resigned after a long sick leave. While it was unfortunate that the school had to assign the graduation coach to teach the class with no warning, Mrs. Hamilton handled the task well, which I will discuss in detail later in my report.

When I learned I would be volunteering at Classic City, I assumed that the students had mostly been placed in the school for their behavior at their previous school. However, it seems that all of the students at Classic City have come to catch up on their credits in hopes of graduating on time. The small population of the school allows more individual attention for students who need it, which is where I found that I was able to make an impact on students. Rather than stick to one student, Mrs. Hamilton asked that I hover around the room, assisting anyone who needed help while not intruding on students who preferred to work on their own. The curriculum of my two classes (American Literature and British Literature respectively) seemed similar to what students in Clarke Central would have; these classes focus on classics that I recall reading in high school and even some I have never read. It was clear that Classic City took the education of its students seriously, as these classes were no easier than a typical high school class.

As I would learn through conversations between students and Mrs. Hamilton, Classic City has an attendance problem. Part of this issue lies in the school's attendance policy, as students face removal only if they miss ten days in a row. As Mrs. Hamilton pointed out one day,

students often take advantage of this lenient policy by missing a week or more and returning for a couple of days before the ten-day mark. Mrs. Hamilton was very transparent in discussing the attendance issue with her students. One day when only three students showed up, she lectured them on the importance of attendance and told them the school board is threatening to shut down Classic City High school unless their attendance reaches around 80% per day. This upset the students in that class, as they showed up almost every day and seemed happy at Classic City. The students said that they all planned to attend Classic City next year, and they talked about how they went about their interviews in a way that would secure them a spot at the school. As for the students that rarely attended, I realize that a lot more factors go into their absences than simply not wanting to go to school, so I understand why the school has a lenient attendance policy. Knowing that a lot of the Classic City students could be from unstable households or may have to work long hours, I think it's a shame that the school board is threatening to shut down the school.

Teachers and Administration

As I mentioned earlier, Mrs. Hamilton had to take over Mrs. Kaiser's class on short notice. I began volunteering just after Mrs. Hamilton had taken over the class, and she seemed to have already established a good relationship with most of the students. Besides one instance where two students had to be sent to ISS for being disruptive, I didn't witness any major behavior issues. Students would occasionally swear or take out their phones at inappropriate times, but they would usually correct the behavior when Mrs. Hamilton told them to. Mrs. Hamilton expected respect from the students while also respecting them, which I think was extremely important. She had conversations with them like they were adults and she was always

open to their opinions. She never conveyed herself as above her students, and she showed that she truly cared about their success. When one student mentioned she was looking for a job, Mrs. Hamilton listed places that were hiring. In another instance, she gave a student extra time to finish his presentation when he had to miss school for a few days. She handled the situation without making it a big deal in front of the whole class, which I thought was very thoughtful of her. The only time I felt that Mrs. Hamilton was not supportive was during a review day when students had to answer questions out loud. Whenever a student would answer a difficult question correctly, she would only nod her head. It felt so excited whenever a student showed genuine progress in class, so it made me sad to see so little enthusiasm from her.

Mrs. Hamilton took a hands-off approach to teaching. She used the technology provided by Classic City to her advantage by giving students assignments where they could conduct their own research and show what they learned. I have always believed that students have better perceptions of school when they are given a sense of autonomy, but the results here were mixed. Some students found a way to use their time in class wisely, but others would waste time until the due date was too close to procrastinate any longer. Either way, I think that the students appreciated this autonomy over being forced to do bookwork all day.

I spent a majority of my time at Classic City helping students with a big project over a given literary period ranging from Victorian to Postmodernism. The instructions were slightly vague and didn't seem well thought out. As I was helping students with some of the slides, I even struggled to help them with some slides, such as when we had to decide what "important events of the era" Mrs. Hamilton was looking for. When students asked for help, she would respond with something along the lines of "don't overthink it." For the other section of the project, Mrs. Hamilton required a "visual aid" that described the event. There was no rubric for

the visual aid section of the project, so I was shocked when one student put a lot of effort into a drawing highlighting the destruction of World War I only to get a large amount of points taken off for not using color. In addition, this student had a good grasp on his topic and didn't simply read off of the board, but he still got a lower grade than another student who read all of her slides word for word. Again, I understood that Mrs. Hamilton was putting these assignments together on short notice. I just felt that she should've given students the benefit of the doubt when they misunderstood aspects of the assignment.

Mrs. Hamilton was absent during one of my visits, so we were left with a substitute. The substitute gave little effort to control the class and allowed students to do whatever they wanted. Luckily, the classes I volunteered with were mostly well behaved, so there were no problems, but it was difficult to get anyone to work. It seemed like they were used to having carefree subs.

On the day we had a substitute, I was able to hear some of the students' opinions on Mrs. Hamilton. One student commented that Mrs. Hamilton "didn't know what she was doing" and another said they wanted a "real teacher." They also complained about their first semester with Mrs. Kaiser where they "didn't learn a thing all year" and did "busy work." These kinds of comments made me realize that students notice when a teacher does not give full effort. I learned that even if students don't say anything to the teacher about their lack of effort, they are still negatively impacted by it.

The Students

_____ Leading up to my time at Classic City, I felt extremely anxious about how students would perceive me. I had no idea if these students would be friendly or hostile, or if the clothes I wore would give a bad impression. Would these students open up to me or dismiss me as another

privileged, condescending white guy? I felt ridiculous for having these worries as soon as I began meeting the students at Classic City. I volunteered in two different classes, and I never had a negative encounter with a student. The students were all polite to me, even when they seemed to be having a bad day or did not want help. I did my best to convey my sincere desire to help them and not just fulfill a requirement for a class, and the students seemed to realize that.

My role as a hovering mentor allowed me to meet and work with a lot of different students. Within my first few minutes volunteering on my first day, I already faced a problem trying to get a student named Brandon on task. While I had learned how to keep elementary-aged children on task from previous field experience, I had never dealt with someone close to my age. Brandon introduced himself and proceeded to talk for at least ten minutes straight about books, science, and his favorite websites. His outgoing nature caught me off guard since I often find it hard to approach people, especially people I have never met. I realized that Brandon's talkative nature would be a problem, as it kept him off task and prevented me from helping other students. To get him back to work, I told him I had to get up to help other students but promised that if he worked on his project for the next thirty minutes, I would come back to hang out with him for a few minutes to give him a break. The tactic worked fairly well, as he ended up working hard on his project without me there to distract him. I'm sure that I will be able to apply similar tactics when I become a teacher if students do not want to work some days.

I also encountered two students who, like myself, were overthinkers. I noticed that both of them had spent the opening ten or fifteen minutes of the class staring at their computer screens with confused looks. As I mentioned earlier, the instructions for the project were vague, so we brainstormed for a few minutes about what events they should include that would define their eras. As an overthinker, I often need reassurance that whatever I'm working on is good, so I

helped these students by assuring them that the ideas they had were valid. To provide even more reassurance, I asked Mrs. Hamilton about the ideas they had, and she approved.

My experiences in assisting students was not always successful, as I often struggled with students who slept in class. One student in particular slept almost every class. Every time I tried to help him, he would ignore me and keep sleeping. Other students would comment things like, “he’s fake sleeping, he does that all the time.” Since I was just a mentor with no authority, I often found myself unsuccessful in keeping students like him awake. I hoped that Mrs. Hamilton would take action to keep these students motivated, but she didn’t show much concern if the students did not immediately wake up. This was the only instance at Classic City where I figured that there was no solution besides giving the student a bad grade, but I even found that unfair since I know that some students may have a complicated home life. When I am a teacher, I will strive to make compromises with exhausted students instead of failing them.

For the most part, the environment of the classroom was positive. Most students were either friends with each other or indifferent to each other, and they would almost always remain independent when working. I only noticed one discrepancy in my time at Classic City between a girl in the class, Holly, and another girl, Sam, who would often walk into our class to visit Mrs. Hamilton. While Sam never acknowledged Holly, I noticed that Holly would act tense whenever Sam entered the room, which made me think there was a problem. This was confirmed when Sam walked in one day and Holly whispered to the girl next to her that she “can’t stand” Sam and used a vulgar adjective to describe her. I inferred that Sam and Holly shared a class together later in the day. Classic City’s administration handled the problem well. An administrator stopped by the classroom during my next visit and talked to Holly in the hallway about the situation. After that, I did not notice any more problems.

As I mentioned earlier, I did not notice any major misbehavior besides one particular instance. In this instance, a student named Kyra playfully took a hair comb from a student named Jack and put it on Mrs. Hamilton's desk. Jack got angry, stole Kyra's pencils from her bag, and refused to give them back. He would not let go of Kyra's pencils until Mrs. Hamilton got the resource officer on the phone. Afterwards, Mrs. Hamilton picked up his comb to give it back to him, but he tried to snatch it from her hand. When he grabbed it, Mrs. Hamilton refused to let it go, insisting that she would not give it back until he sat back down and allowed her to give it to him. I could not pinpoint exactly what caused Jack to act so disruptively that day, as he had not shown outright disrespect to Mrs. Hamilton before this. I could only assume that he was having a bad day and chose to act out.

Me as a Tutor, Mentor, and Future Educator

I believe that being a good mentor was the most important part of my experience at Classic City. The students I worked with were all incredibly bright, but sometimes they just needed a little push to get to work. I felt that I truly brightened some students' days simply by chatting with them before class about their plans for the weekend or talking with them about common interests. On my last two visits, Holly even told me good morning when she walked into class, which made me feel like my brief time at the school positively impacted the students. Between teaching and working as the graduation coach, Mrs. Hamilton stayed busy, so by mentoring her students, I feel like I helped these students feel valued. Although some students did not want to talk to me very much, I still felt like I was making a difference simply by reaching out to them.

Serving as both a mentor and a tutor felt like an awkward balance at times. I realized that I was no more than a year older than most of the students, so asking them to stay on task always felt strange. In addition, I would feel awkward in situations like Brandon's where we would have a conversation as friends before I had to ask them to get back to work. I realize, however, that as a teacher, I will always be facing the balance between being emotionally supportive to students while simultaneously being the "boss" of the classroom, so serving as both a mentor and tutor was good practice for that. Despite having to deal with this balance, I still think that I had positive impacts on these students' education. For example, I taught a few students how to correctly make a works cited page, and I helped several students learn how to distinguish between a reliable source and an unreliable one. I believe that these types of research skills were the most important things I taught students since they are skills that they will be able to take with them throughout their lives.

Overall, Classic City has only made me more enthusiastic for my future as an educator. The feeling that I got whenever I connected with a student or helped them make a breakthrough was unlike any other. Classic City also reinforced my notion that there is no such thing as a "bad kid." Every student I met at Classic City had such a great heart, and whether they would admit it or not, they all cared about their education to some degree. Mentoring at Classic City has reminded me to never give up on a student no matter how unmotivated they may appear. My time at Classic City has brought out my strengths as a teacher while pointing out what I need to work on to become even better. I can truly say that after my experience at Classic City, I have never been more excited to become a teacher.