

A High School Experience That Can Only Be Described as “Classical”

Former mayor of Providence reflects on his formative years as a student at Classical High School

By **JORGE ELORZA**

ALTHOUGH MY PARENTS’ formal education extended only through fourth grade, they knew that a good education was the ticket to a better life. They made their way from Guatemala to the United States, and ever since, their message to my sister and me was the same: education, education, education!

Like so many parents, my mother and father were willing to make any sacrifice and endure any hardship so that their children had a chance to attain the American Dream. Like so many parents, they also put their entire hopes and dreams on our city’s public schools to provide that opportunity.

As I lived through my K–12 education journey, I enjoyed almost every part of the ride. However, reflecting back on my experience, I recognize some important lessons—beyond the academics—that were revealed to me over time. I’ve learned to appreciate all the helpers that we encounter along the way and to be thankful that they appear at key moments in our lives. I’ve learned about the sometimes-determinative role of luck. I’ve learned about the importance of great, lasting friendships.

I can say without question that I would neither be who I am nor where I am today if it were not for Classical High School in Providence. Classical is the only test-in public high school in the city—the school that the most-prepared 9th graders attend. For kids who grow up on my side of the city (the less affluent, more challenged side), going to Classical often changes the entire trajectory of your life. If you attend Classical, you have a good shot of attaining the American Dream. If you do not attend Classical, things are different. Today, for example, only 2.4% of Providence 12th graders are able to do math at grade level. They may graduate from high school, but it’s hard to say that they are on track and prepared for success.

A day that will always stand out in my mind is a random Friday in 1988. I was an 8th grader, and it was the last day to register for the Classical entrance exam. Being the irresponsible tween-ager that I was, I had not yet signed up. It was late in the afternoon when my guidance counselor, Lou Toro, came to my classroom and singled me out in front of my peers. He walked directly toward me, curtly told me to come with him, and, if I remember correctly, grabbed me by my shirt to let me know that I didn’t have a say in the matter.

Mr. Toro walked me back to his office, put a pen in my hand, and made me register for the exam.

If it were not for Mr. Toro, I would not have attended Classical High School. His intervention changed my life, and I will always be profoundly grateful to him.

I think back on that pivotal moment and everything that could have easily prevented it from happening. What if an emergency had arisen that afternoon and Mr. Toro was not able to pluck me out of class? What if Mr. Toro or I had hap-



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pened to be sick or absent that day? Factors entirely out of my control have played such key roles in my life, which has always made me approach the world with a sense of humility and compassion. I appreciate, as Chief Justice John Roberts has said, “the role of chance in life and understand that [our] success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either.”

Although I turned out to be a subpar high school student (that’s a whole story in itself), attending Classical High School put me in proximity to people who inspired me forward.

Had I attended a different high school, I almost certainly

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were. But it strikes me that teacher motivation to use them as intended must be an issue, just as it is for students. Teachers are crazy-busy, and apps like these are, ultimately, extra work.

To their credit, some districts provide incentives, such as counting the time teachers spend using the apps against professional learning requirements or allowing recordings to stand in for weekly classroom walkthroughs. Those are steps in the right direction—but we shouldn't expect uptake to be universal. To me, it seems likely that the worst teachers, who arguably would have the most to gain, are the least likely to engage with these sorts of technologies.

From Bodycams to Classroom Cams

I don't think it would be crazy, then, for someone to develop a version of this idea that is less about helping well-meaning teachers get better, and more about holding the small number of ineffective teachers accountable. Our schools have long faced the "street-level bureaucrat" problem, coined by political scientist Michael Lipsky in 1969. The idea is that some government services depend so much on the judgment and discretion of people on the ground that it's hard to evaluate their work or hold them accountable. Teaching is one of those fields; policing is another.

In the world of law enforcement, dash cams and bodycams have changed the equation by providing a clear record of police officers' interactions with the public, for good or ill. No doubt

this has spurred all manner of questions and challenges, such as when to release footage, how to interpret it, and what is admissible in court. Bodycam mandates have garnered some support along with serious concerns about privacy and reliability. But there's little doubt that police brutality and misconduct face greater scrutiny now than in the past.

So why not bring the same line of thinking into public schools? Put cameras and microphones in every classroom. Turn them on and keep them on. Send the recordings to the cloud and let machine learning do its thing (with strict privacy and security protocols in place, of course). If AI already can differentiate between good and bad questions, surely it can tell principals or department chairs if a teacher starts instruction late and ends it early, or shows movies every Friday, or allows kids to roam the hallways, or makes no effort to stop them from cheating on tests. If such technology could stop the most egregious forms of bad teaching, it might provide a significant boost to student achievement.

Alas, given education politics, that will probably remain just one wonk's dream. In the meantime, let's use AI to help as many motivated teachers as possible go from good to great.

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would have followed my neighborhood friends down a wrong and dangerous path. The temptations were all around me, and I likely would not have been able to resist them. I watched so many peers, who I considered to be just as smart and capable as me, make bad decisions and descend dead-end paths. That is not to say that such a fate would have been a foregone conclusion. Many friends who did not attend Classical have indeed made great lives for themselves. But too many others, sadly, were unable to do so.

While at Classical, I had the benefit of being surrounded by a large percentage of kids who were just like me. We were, so to speak, "good" kids from the "bad" part of town. Although we were not model students (far from it), there were limits to how far down the wrong path we were willing to go. The culture at Classical both restrained us from giving in to temptation and encouraged us to continue setting our sights high. We were hungry, we supported each other, and we didn't let each other stray too far off course.

Looking back at my core group of high school friends, I am thankful that I had the opportunity to grow up among them. Together, we organically created a set of expectations for each other that was distinct from those that existed with our friends in the neighborhood. To this day, my closest group of friends is still my "crew" from high school. I don't know if it

has ever been studied, but it wouldn't surprise me if a distinct bond among friend groups, forged in places like Classical, is maintained for years, even decades, beyond high school.

As luck would have it, Mr. Toro followed me to Classical, transitioning from guidance counselor at my middle school to the same role at my high school. I was fortunate to count on his advice for four additional years, and over 25 years later, he continues to touch the lives of new students every year. Similarly, in the 26 years since we graduated, I continue to communicate regularly with my high school friends. We reminisce on the good times of our youth, we embellish and laugh at the same juvenile jokes, and we still challenge and encourage each other in our personal and professional lives.

Being keenly aware of the academic and social benefits of exam schools like Classical, I hope that every child in this country has the option of attending a school like it. In the organization that I now lead, Democrats for Education Reform, we advocate for a broad range of high-quality public school options, and for test-in magnet schools to be part of that menu of choices. Such schools provide not only a top-notch education but also life lessons that may prove even more meaningful many years down the road.

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