

Jerel Perez

Classroom Visit and Teacher Interview

09:05 AM

Ms. Kaiser began with a warm up on solubility while her students were taking their time on settling in for the ninety minute class. I could tell from her loud tone, which had to carry over the students' talking and moving around, that chemistry was the first thing on their minds this Tuesday. Her instructions were firm and positive: students were asked to find three factors that affect solubility and write them down as they would share their answers in a few moments. The class frantically rummaged through their textbooks and notes. Only then did they begin to settle into the lesson for the day while Ms. Kaiser moved about the room to see how they handled the situation. After five minutes she got the attention of the class by asking for their results to little but confused responses. She then asked the class if they happen to look at the cards that were sitting on top of the desks when they sat down. One student shouted, "Yeah! The answers were on them." The rest of the class scabbled to find them under all of their papers and books while Ms. Kaiser could only smile and laugh.

This seemed all too much like a typical day for Ms. Kaiser as she holds the duty of getting her students interested in studying chemistry five days a week. It seemed like a challenge from where I sat but she used the environment well to help her with educational material like periodic tables, chemical nomenclature, and a section of pencils for students covering the walls. Ms. Kaiser reviewed the three factors that affected solubility by engaging the class with "Who knows?" questions. "List them . . . temperature, molecular size, and . . . who knows? . . . The type of solution." She then asked them to break up into groups and assigned questions for the students to come up with concerning an assigned topic and so they did. A small trio of students sat near me and evidently was struggling with their topic as they searched their books with frustration. For a few minutes I thought it best to observe their

behavior and thought process on how to come up with questions concerning the how the type of solute affects solubility until Ms. Kaiser said, "Raise your hand if you need more time." Everyone's hands shot right up. I turned to the group in front of me and asked if they wanted some help only to have their eyes dart at me and say please. They had the hardest question of the whole class so explained how water is a universal solvent while acids and bases dissolve substances at different rates. They continued to look confused so I gave it another try. As I attempted to help them understand rather than give them the answer, I tried to look at the lesson from their point of view and eventually had to change my tactics. As I went into a little more detail about solutions and mixtures I could start to see in body language that they were beginning to understand and then started writing some questions for the class on their large sheet of paper. Ms. Kaiser was not only delighted that I helped them, but noted that she was very impressed with the group's response since she gave them the hardest topic. After all of the group's presentations there was a review and then a lab that concluded the first class of the day.

Knowing that the school was at risk of being closed by the state due to poor achievement on TAKS and attendance ratings I expected a great struggle with the students understanding the material, but that lesson and lab seemed to go fairly well for tenth and eleventh graders. What I did notice a lot of was discipline and respect issues such as students arguing loudly with each other and students coming in and out of the room often. One male student came in during lab with his drumsticks just to see his friends. Another student that had been in the class in its entirety – the "smart kid" – pulled out his drumsticks only to begin a drum-off while the teacher was attempting to give support to every student. She graciously invited the first student by name to stay if he wants to help or please leave as he was being disruptive. Ms. Kaiser repeated the word "respect" many times during the class presentations since most students were talking and throwing paper regularly. It usually worked for a short time but you could tell that they all respected her as a teacher when she left the room to obtain some copies while the class

remained relatively calm. There was also a good amount of time reflected on the upcoming TAKS tests and how students need to complete their scheduled objectives on Saturday. The fact that students needed constant individual attention during lab showed me that their critical thinking skills may be a struggle in testing as was their lack of focus.

After her second class I had the opportunity to speak with Ms. Kaiser one-on-one. She looked burnt and had to “at least grab a Diet Coke first” since it was near lunch time before we could sit down and discuss her concerns with the school’s situation. Candice Kaiser has a degree in child development and did not intend to become a teacher at first as her original plan was to complete medical school only to find a new path ahead of her. It took three months for her to finish her alternative certification and had now been a teacher for three years at Reagan. She obviously became frustrated with the issue of the school closure as she let out a big sigh and swiftly brushed her hair from her face when I asked about it. Though she and the students understand that the fate of the school is at hand everyday Ms. Kaiser does not believe that the school will be shut down. She says “God is on our side,” and to the reports that most of these students cannot speak English well enough to learn is “a bunch of political propaganda.” Her biggest challenges come from where the students have been before class such as home life, lunch, or other school activities. The first class of the morning is usually the most difficult one to get on task and focused. Attendance is another issue that has many challenges, but she is not hopeless she says. Pushing the structure and the importance of the TAKS is one thing to her and the other is when students willfully show up on Saturdays for open science forums and fun lab experiments.

Ms. Kaiser is also part of the Austin Stone Church like Michael Madison the volunteer coordinator for Reagan High so she knows much about the community and its struggles as well. She knows a few parents through her Bible study groups and the FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) but finds it hard to communicate with parents about their kids. “It is easier communicating with kids these

days since most of them have cell phones,” she insists. She even encourages her students to use their phones to find answers in chemistry with Google. She knows that her students are smart and have a chance to do well for themselves but there is a lingering cloud above the school that threatens to wash them out of the system. During the group work at the open of class one of the students I helped asked if I was a teacher and I told her “not yet.” She was generally intrigued by the topic and thought it was cool that I enjoyed studying chemistry. I wondered if she thought it was interesting or hard. Why was she so intrigued if she thought it was a difficult subject? Reagan definitely has students that respect education, yet a girl from the next class I visited also asked if I was a teacher; she was not as satisfying as the first.

10:45 AM

In Ms. Howard’s Physics observation she informed me that this was her rowdy class as if to prepare me for what I was about to witness. After she gave her students instructions to get started on their work boards (group work on TAKS questions) she asked if I wanted to be a teacher and I said “Yes.” All she could say was “Oh, bless your heart.” One of the girls that I was sitting near asked why I wanted to be a teacher. Before I could answer she interrupted with a loud voice from such a tiny girl, “I don’t mean to be rude, but why would you want to teach to a rowdy group like us?” I told her that I enjoyed studying science and wanted to help others enjoy it as well. She showed that she had no interest in studying anything at all and did not like school much through her demeanor for the rest of the class. When a small group of volunteers came in to observe the class as well she spotted them and said that she wanted to scare them a little so she grabbed her hammer from the group’s workspace and began swinging it around, yelling to the teacher that she was hungry. By the look in their eyes as they gazed the room of undisciplined students they were scared and left the room shortly after.

This class showed to be disappointingly unmanaged by Ms. Howard since the students yelled and argued constantly, did not stay on task, openly cussed in front of the teacher, and walked about the

room the room as though it were a free period. Many students demanded the attention of the teacher often during class for instruction and help by yelling, though she spent individual time with certain students at her desk and joked around with those coming in and out of the room that were not in the class. Most students were not involved with their groups and chose to listen to their headphones or be disruptive. It became easy to see a day at school through the eyes of the students and I pondered questions about such a class: Where is the lesson? What are they gaining right now? Are they concerned with learning or their environment? The question of what was missing became the most overpowering as well as how this chaos was affecting them as learners. Ms. Howard stressed to me in conversation outside of the class that the students need to learn things for themselves and that motivating them is very difficult. She notes the disorderly conduct of the students as an example of how it is difficult as a teacher to bridge the gap between the want to learn and personal desires.

These two visits show the good, the bad, and the ugly of the controversy behind shutting down Reagan High School by putting a spotlight on the student perspective. The lesson on attitude toward students was the most substantial when I observed in Ms. Kaiser's class and helped some students during group work that most want to be taught, but most also do not know how to be a respectful student. Devote attention to the students is what made the ideal difference in turning a rowdy class into a group of active learners when comparing the two classes and methods used. This was my first time in a high school classroom since high school and it was still good.