

# 'Undercover Student'

## — lessons to be learned

The "Undercover Student" series in *The Tribune* last week has caused quite a stir in the Albuquerque community and at Eldorado High School in particular.

Many questions have been addressed to this newspaper, which we will try to answer as forthrightly as we can.

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First it should be pointed out that *The Tribune* does not consider this series the definitive work on the inside of Albuquerque schools. We see it as no more or less than a two-week slice of life inside a big high school.

Reporter Leslie Linthicum's experiences were not presented as a microcosm of Albuquerque high schools nor of Eldorado High itself.

This newspaper recognizes there are many facets of Eldorado that were not brought to "Leslie Taylor's" attention. The school has a magnificent musical program. It has consistently winning athletic teams. And it has a splendid record of academic achievement.

When Leslie Taylor enrolled at the school, she might well have been cast into a different classroom environment. But either by chance or by the choice of the counselor she was led to the encounters she experienced.

Going into the project, *The Tribune* had no way of knowing to which subjects she would be assigned. Had she been placed in other classes, her stories would have read differently. Who can say what is a typical day or week at any school?

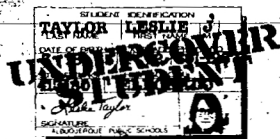
One of the recommendations that could be made as a result of Miss Linthicum's experience as an undercover student is that there should be an orientation program at the high school for transferred students. Perhaps a service club could be formed and its members could be assigned to escort new students for the first week at school. That way a student could become acquainted with the many favorable features we know are part of the Eldorado scene.

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The lessons of the "Undercover Student" project are not easy to isolate. We think they break down into three main areas:

1. Do all teachers really teach? Have some been encouraged or instructed to depend more on devices such as movies and filmstrips? To many readers, one of Ms. Linthicum's most astonishing reports was that she was assigned to read a book in class instead of at home, which could have saved class time for discussion. Ms. Linthicum estimated she spent 55 hours in class and heard from teachers in only one-third of those hours. If this is a superior way to teach, it comes as a surprise to many observers.

2. The abuse of drugs and alcohol. Now everyone knows that teens drink, that they can usually find some adult (that is, someone over 21) to buy a six-pack of beer or a bottle of booze for them. No one seriously expects the schools to be the enforcement agent everywhere. However, on its own grounds, the school has every right to use its security force to seek out illegal drug and alcohol sales, to find the



youngsters who are stoned in class and to bring this to the attention of parents. To Eldorado's credit, Leslie Linthicum did witness at least one crackdown on a student for drug abuse. And to the discredit of students nearby, the administrator was taunted for taking the action.

Why can't APS employ its security force, and call in the city police if necessary, to conduct periodic raids on school abuse of drugs and alcohol? If they come often enough and swift enough, there would soon be a decline in the use and sale of drugs in our schools.

3. Motivation of students. We know you can lead a horse to water but you can't necessarily make it think. It was Leslie Taylor's lot to be cast in with students who did not appear thirsty for knowledge. It would be heartening to know that something is being done to motivate learning among students who are not self-starters. This is easier said than done and requires cooperation among teachers, students and parents. Eldorado is blessed with many interested parents who could be organized into groups to assist students who may not get all the attention they need in class.

We don't know what it takes to get all youngsters to show respect to their teachers, but there should be some procedure for a teacher to follow when some wise-acre kid disrupts a class with ill-mannered behavior that tends to undermine the teacher's authority.

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There are a few other points in the wake of this series that should be addressed:

Some persons were critical of the "undercover" tactic. We understand their objections up to a point — it's hard to approve of deception. Yet, how else would anyone get an inside look at any subject? In foreign relations we call this "intelligence." In investigative reporting, it is the only way to get information firsthand.

Numerous callers and writers gave us compliments ranging from "good stunt" to "it's about time someone told what is really going on inside that school."

We are grateful for all the reactions, both favorable and unfavorable, because we feel that part of our role in this community is to bring situations to light and let the public then decide what, if anything, should be done about them. However, we do not consider this a stunt — it is a solid way to get a story of interest to the community.

There have been accusations *The Tribune* was out to "get" Eldorado. This, of course, is false. This newspaper has admired Eldorado and its feeder schools for years. We helped raise money to send its vaunted orchestra to Vienna two summers ago. We have frequently reported on its strengths as a school of musical, academic and athletic achievement.

The truth is that another high school, the city's most ethnically balanced one, was *The Tribune's* first choice for the "Undercover Student" project. But, through a miscalculation, the prearranged address offered by Ms. Linthicum proved to be outside that school's boundaries. She was shooed away from the office. Eldorado, the city's largest high school, became the second choice.

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In summary, we are aware that self-examination is never a totally pleasant experience. And when *The Tribune* tries to report on the inside of a situation, it is akin to self-examination because we are all a part of the same community. A better community for one is a better community for all.

The real value of the "Undercover Student" will be if it results in better students in all Albuquerque schools.

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