

Class notes: A look at high school in the '80s

By VIVIAN S. TOY
of The Journal staff

It's three minutes before English class starts, and the boy is in a panic. He has forgotten to read the assigned lines in "Beowulf," and he hasn't answered the questions.

He turns to a friend for help, and she's glad to give him the answers. Sure enough, he's called on in class, but he has the answer. As the teacher turns to something else, the boy breathes a sigh of relief and whispers a "thanks" over his shoulder to his friend.

Two girls at lunch tell of their plans to go to the

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University of Wisconsin and study broadcast journalism. "We're going to be roommates," one says.

Nearby, another girl talks of going to the University of Chicago, but the \$17,000 yearly tuition makes it mostly a dream.

"Everybody thinks they're better than me," a boy tells the girls he's chatting with, and one of the girls says, "I ignore it and just live my life."

"That's what I try to do, but it ain't easy," the boy

his problem.

One by one the girls and boys in fourth-hour gym class lift their bare feet and hold them in front of the nurse's face. She's checking for plantar's warts and athlete's foot. "This is so stupid!" one girl protests.

It's everyday life at high school, in this case St. Francis High School, 4225 S. Lake Dr., St. Francis.

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The new kid at St. Francis High School

To learn what it's like to be in high school in 1986, Journal reporter Vivian S. Toy, 23, enrolled in St. Francis High School as a senior transfer student this fall.

She attended classes for three weeks, did homework, took tests, went to football games and a school dance.

The St. Francis School Board and the school superintendent approved her stay at the high school beforehand, with the condition that the school principal, her six teachers and her guidance counselor be informed that she was a Journal reporter.

Students were told that she was a transfer student from New York. They treated her as a student, passing notes to her in class, inviting her to movies on weekends and calling her at home to express concern when she was absent.

Her teachers treated her as they would any stu-

dent, fining her for chewing gum, reprimanding her for not bringing her materials to class and calling on her to answer questions.

Toy is from New York. She graduated in 1981 from Phillips Academy, a private high school in Andover, Mass. She graduated from Harvard University in 1985.

Toy has been a Journal reporter since September 1985. She was assigned to approach the St. Francis project without any preconceptions of what high school is or should be. The assignment simply was to find out what it is like to be in high school in 1986 from the teenager's point of view. What do high school students think about? What are their concerns? What do they do in their free time? What do they do in school?

In a series of articles that began in WISCONSIN magazine on Sunday, she reports this week that she



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NAME

VIVIAN S. TOY

GRADE

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Vivian Toy's pass to high school

found the old adage to be true: The more things change, the more they stay the same.

STEPPING BACK

Where there's smoke . . .

Teenagers sneak cigarettes despite school's warnings

By VIVIAN S. TOY
of The Journal staff

For as long as kids have been smoking in school bathrooms, teachers have been trying to stop them.

At St. Francis High School, the new principal, Steve Okoniewski, sent an ominous note to each student on the first day of school this year. The note said that a City of St. Francis ordinance prohibited smoking in the school building, and that violators faced fines of \$25 plus \$1 in court costs.

Still, the student bathrooms fill with cigaret smoke between classes.

In the girls' bathroom, students huddle in groups of four or five to a stall, sharing a cigaret in the four short minutes between classes.

Occasionally, a few girls race out of the bathroom in a panic when they realize how little time they have to get to their lockers and their next classes.

One day during the third week of school, the principal calls aside a senior girl during her study hall. Her friends

"I heard you and three other girls got busted."

— One student to another

watch as she is confronted by Okoniewski, an imposing former pro football player.

They can tell from the expression on her face that the news is not good.

She walks back into study hall cursing. She has been busted and fined for smoking in the school building.

Word travels fast.

After the next period, another friend of hers comes running up to her in the hall: "I heard you and three other girls got busted. What happened?"

What happened is that a teacher with a classroom key they were smoking. They all were fined. The word is that this teacher is known for "bustin' people big."

The girls post a sentinel at the door of the bathroom from then on, to warn smokers when a teacher approaches.

In a congenial gossip session at the end of a class, a teacher says to his students, "I'll tell you one rumor that's not true is that teachers don't cut out of the fine when they turn people in for smoking."

"Oh, is that why [a particular teacher] is always in the bathroom?" one student asks smidely. "Because she gets paid too little?"

The teacher ignores the comment. "I'll tell you another thing," he continues. "Kids will say anything in front of teachers now. They don't hold back at all."

Many of the smallest, personage students who smoke take advantage of the grounds surrounding the school. Every morning before school starts, they smoke freely in a cluster at the back door. And as soon as the 2:30 bells ring each afternoon, students head outside and light up cigarets again.

During the lunch hour, students leave the lunchroom and wander out of the sight of supervisors to smoke. They wander toward Lake Michigan, or around to the rear and west side of the building.

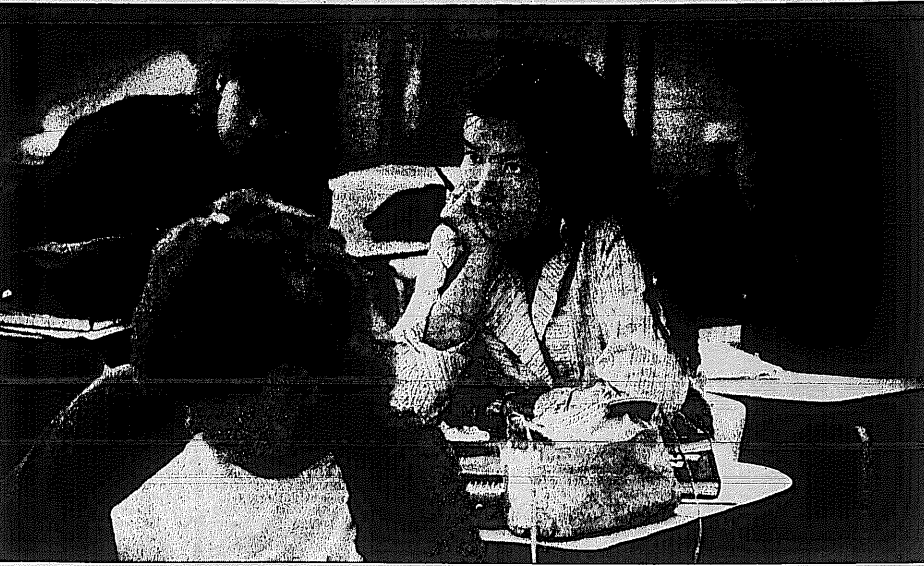
Bolder students take advantage of free moments during a golf class on the school's homemade course.

Two girls consider lighting up a cigaret while they are playing just over a hill from the teacher, but decide it's too risky. They decide to wait until the hour is over.

Then, "Give me a cig," one student commands the other as they walk back to the gym, knowing that the teacher always goes back through another door.

"Wait until we get around the building so teachers can't see us from the windows," her friends warn.

So they stand against the west wall, sharing a cigaret. They call to their sport partners, who are heading toward the gym. "Tell the teacher we're out here looking for a ball."



Five years after her high school graduation, reporter Vivian Toy went back to high school to see what it is like today



Zaida Moore tried to concentrate on a biology lesson



Mike Scherman ran a more casual class. He is one of the school's most popular teachers



Journal photos by Jim Gehrz

Denise Doberstein took advantage of the last few minutes of study hall to fix her makeup before meeting some friends between classes

Grab a pen, get rid of that gum — and don't be tardy

School, from Page 1

When the first-hour bell rings on the first day of school, students quickly begin learning what will be expected of them.

Each teacher spends at least part of the first day of school in September laying down rules and outlining classroom expectations.

St. Francis' principal, Steve Okoniewski, comes across as a strict disciplinarian. As she addresses a senior class, her delivery is deadpan:

"Bring your materials to class. I will rent pens for 10 cents and pencils for a nickel. But if you forget your things, you will be marked down for the day. . . . There will be no eating. . . . Gum chewing is allowed only if it doesn't bother me. If I see it on the floors or if I see you blowing huge bubbles, I will bother me. . . . Do not ask for passes to leave my classroom. I don't care where you have to go. If it's a dire emergency, I might give you a pass before you die. . . . But don't count on it."

Throughout the teacher's 40-minute monologue, the 22 students sit silently. They occasionally make faces and gesture to one another when she isn't looking.

McDermott concludes: "My job is to help you learn. But it is your job to learn. I have a contract and I get my paycheck whether you learn or not. So you have to do your part."

The students roll their eyes and hope that their part will not be too demanding. This is a required class for seniors, so many are here only because they have to be. Mike Scherman, a Spanish teacher, also goes through a set of classroom expectations on the first day, but he spends less than 10 minutes on them and then launches into his MacGyver course work.

The class is more casual because there are only eight students. It is an advanced-level elective, so Scherman can safely assume that the group is motivated and interested.

The students participate eagerly and gripe only briefly when the teacher assigns homework on the first day of classes.

In addition to the ground rules, teachers make it clear from the start that they occasionally will check notebooks for homework assignments: "In many classes, homework is not handed in each day, but students are expected to have it ready when they are called on."

Some teachers at St. Francis take it a step further and administer notebook tests. These tests, once or twice a semester, ask questions such as: What was the homework assignment on Sept. 18? or what was the answer to Question No. 5 on the Sept. 22 quiz?

The goal is to get students in the habit of keeping organized notebooks and folders.

"My job is to help you learn. But it is your job to learn. I have a contract and I get my paycheck whether you learn or not. So you have to do your part."

— St. Francis teacher

As a result, students rarely go to any of their classes without the requisite materials.

While students generally seem interested and willing to participate, there are exceptions.

To motivate students in an Algebra II class that isn't very lively, Jim Briselden appeals to their sense of competition. While preparing for a test, he asks the class whether there are any questions on the material. He gets no response.

"Well, I'm surprised," he says. "My fifth-hour class had lots of questions. They wanted to know why the answers to the homework were what I said they were. They didn't just look at the answers and correct their mistakes without finding out why they were wrong."

A few students are shamed into speaking up.

To elicit an even greater response, Briselden appeals to their sense of pride as underclassmen.

"We all know that freshmen learn from minute to minute," he says. "They forget things a minute after they've learned it. But I know you all are mature enough to get beyond that and know how to ask intelligent questions so you can retain things better."

A few more students are shamed into speaking up. And, of course, there occasionally are students who literally sleep through their classes.

During a question-and-answer period in an English class, one boy in the fourth row peacefully dozes the hour away behind his mirror sunglasses.

He sets his head upright on his crossed hands, which are resting on top of his textbook. He sneezes audibly until he shifts positions.

For the rest of the period, he dozes with a pen in hand, poised on the middle of the page on his notebook, which he has propped on his textbook. But neither his hand, his head nor his notebook ever falls out of position. He gets through class undisturbed.

When it comes to homework, almost everyone completes at least part of each assignment before coming to class. But they don't always do their own work and they don't always do it at home.

worksheet assigned for sixth hour. The friend asks sarcastically, "Umm, can I help you?"

The first girl nods as she wolfed down the last bite of a hotdog. "I didn't do the worksheet."

She finds the homework, takes it, thanks her friend and starts copying it during lunch. She finishes copying it during her fifth-hour class.

"The scene is not unusual. Homework is often a communal effort in a quest to get it done and get right."

Although not everyone does well when it comes to test time, they all do what they can to do well.

There are those who study the old-fashioned way, those who study in their own unique ways, and those who cheat.

The conventional students read their notes and texts over and over until they can recite the answers that are expected of them.

But since this can become tedious, some people devise their own study aids.

For example, minutes before a test in a Family Living class, two seniors quiz each other. The girl asks the boy to name the hierarchy of basic human needs. He thinks

for a while and then blurts out, "Oh, I know. Please Send Lisa Some Smoke."

"Yeah, but what does it stand for?" his partner asks.

He pauses and finally replies, "Umm, physiological, security, love, self-esteem and self-actualization."

"Right!" she exclaims. She fires the next question at him. "What is a blended family?"

He ponders the question and says, "I always get those different families mixed up."

She waits for a while and then starts singing the theme song from the television series "The Brady Bunch."

"Oh, oh, Brady Bunch, a blended family (when there are two parents and stepchildren from previous marriages)," he says. "Yeah, I'm going to ace this test."

And finally, there are those who cheat. Their eyes wander across the aisles to decipher what they can of their neighbors' tests. Or they smuggle in a set of crib notes, carefully tucked inside a sleeve.

Some of the students' methods might not seem orthodox, but no matter how — or if — they study, they manage to sit down to their exams with confidence.

Next: A tough new principal?

Bill

From Page 1

Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, is that law enforcement is more expensive: \$1 spent in a classroom buys more than \$1 given to drug law-enforcement agencies.

And a larger reason is that drug education is not politically expedient. The drug bill authorizes about \$200 million to be given to the states for a variety of school and community education programs. It also establishes several new government agencies and commissions to coordinate a national drug education campaign.

But experts say none of that will produce noticeable results this year or next. Drug education may not produce many noticeable effects for a generation, long after most of the officials and members of Congress who crafted this bill will have left office.

At the same time, the \$1.1 billion in the bill dedicated to local, state and federal law-enforcement agencies is likely to produce immediate, visible results.

To that end, the drug bill authorizes nearly \$300 million for strengthened drug-law enforcement on the Mexican border, including more radar balloons, airplanes, helicopters and boats. It establishes a \$10 million drug law-enforcement task force in the Bahamas.

It gives the states \$230 million for enhancing local enforcement capabilities. It nearly doubles the State Department's \$50 million budget for drug-law-enforcement abroad.

The bill increases fines and prison terms for drug offenses tenfold or more, in some cases. To deal with all the new inmates, it authorizes \$96.5 million for new federal prisons.

No one in the enforcement agencies is unhappy to get the hundreds of millions of dollars in additional money, but some officials note that they are not entirely sure what to do with it. For example, shortly after the White House announced that it would spend \$100 million for a new drug interdiction program along the Gulf Coast, the heads of federal enforcement agencies, who were meeting in September, all realized that the money had not been allotted to any specific agency yet.

The bill also allows more money for treatment of drug abusers and for drug research, about \$275 million, than it does for drug education.

Cusick, whose committee had a major hand in drafting the drug bill, acknowledged that at \$200 million, financing for education programs was dwarfed by the money for enforcement and other programs. But previously, he said, the federal government spent almost nothing on drug education. Last year, \$23 million was spent for that purpose.