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Why EHS? Reaction swift on 'undercover student' series — from obscenities and insights to hoorays

Last week, *The Tribune* published a week-long series based on reporter Leslie Linthicum's experiences posing for 11 days as a senior at Eldorado High School. Today's story takes a look at the reaction the articles have sparked.

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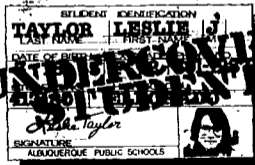
Reaction to *The Tribune's* "Undercover Student" series came swiftly and with startling intensity last week.

Although the series didn't actually start until Tuesday, my telephone began ringing Monday night, after an introductory article was published. And it seldom stopped after that.

The calls came from students, teachers and

parents, and their messages ranged from the obscene to the insightful.

The newspaper and I received some 100 calls during publication of the week-long series. Many



letters to the *Tribune* editor have been received and will be published over the next several days.

Critics especially wanted to know "why Eldorado High School?" and complained that the stories looked only at the school's bad points, ignoring its good side.

Readers who called in praise congratulated my courage and said they were pleased to see such problems as campus drug abuse and classroom time-wasting brought into the open.

Many of the earliest calls were from Eldorado students who expressed shock that a newspaper would infiltrate their school. They complained that *The Tribune* had singled out Eldorado even though the problems mentioned in the articles could have been found at any of the city's high schools.

"If you go to any school in the city you're going to

find these problems and I don't think Eldorado should be picked on," one student said.

Some student callers were ferocious.

I had to begin screening calls after young voices repeatedly yelled obscene messages before hanging up, and I was prompted to request additional police protection after threats of "watch your step" and "they're going to come and get you."

At least 30 times, callers hung up as soon as I answered the phone.

Ironically, late in the week I received a call from a physician, who offered her unsolicited help, predicting I would encounter "physical and emotional abuse."

But many students said they found the articles

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accurate and welcomed the attention to the high school's problems.

"A senior boy at Eldorado, said, "You hit it on the nose." However, he added that there are many demanding classes at the school as well as educationally empty ones, and, "other high schools are just as bad."

An ex-football player who graduated last year said he wasn't surprised by anything I wrote.

"I slept through classes and never did a bit of homework my senior year, and I got straight Bs," he said. "I stayed drunk and stoned the whole time." Upon enrolling at the University of New Mexico, he said he found "I wasn't prepared at all."

One of "Leslie Taylor's" former classmates said the series caused one teacher to crack down on horseplay. "That's good," she said. "I think it should have been done a long time ago."

The article on drug use on campus elicited the most response.

Students almost unanimously said that drugs are more prevalent than reported.

"Everybody's selling it to make some bucks," one student said. "If you're not smoking you're not cool. If you're not drinking you're not cool. There's a lot of grass all over the place. Everywhere you go people are trying to sell you stuff."

Another caller, who had attended two Albuquerque public high schools, said drug use was not limited to "freaks" or "burnouts" but also was prevalent among good students and athletes.

A few students I had met said they had suspected I was not really a student and thought I was an undercover narcotics agent.

The rest of the Albuquerque media reacted to the series as well. I was asked to make eight TV or radio appearances.

One was a panel discussion with two EHS seniors, during which the students suggested that drug use might only appear to be more widespread these days.

"Drugs can be found at any other high school," one of the senior girls said. "Nowadays, it's more open. Kids aren't as secretive about it."

The other girl said she thought the drug problem was "scary. I'm concerned about that. It's a big problem and the administration is concerned about it."

A former Rio Grande High School student said the facts presented in the "Undercover Student" series were also "very typical" of his former school.

The mother of four current or former EHS students called to say her children thought the series wasn't "hard enough."

"There has been one tremendous problem in the way classes are taught and with drug and alcohol use on campus," she said.

Other parents said they welcomed the series as the only way they could find out what was going on in high schools. "I think people need to know what goes on in high schools," one mother said. "I think parents need to know."

"I've always felt that parents do not have any way of finding out what goes on in the classrooms," said another parent.

The father of two EHS students complained that the articles were full of generalizations and said his children told him the picture was "blown out of proportion."

But the father of four EHS graduates said the articles "square with the way our teenagers used to report it."

An Eldorado teacher began a letter, "Ah, Leslie, my dear. It's a cheap-shot artist you are," and accused the newspaper of "savaging" a teacher.

A parent called to complain that the newspaper had not covered a fund-raising drive during which Eldorado students collected \$12,000 for the family of a teacher who died of cancer.

Several readers questioned the ethics of sending a reporter undercover to get a story. One man complained the newspaper should not resort to "fraud" and deception to gather the news.

Many callers suggested that I would have gotten a fairer picture if I had attended several high schools.

One woman even suggested *The Tribune* send an "undercover child" into Albuquerque homes because she said many problems are the fault and responsibility of parents, not teachers.

A former school administrator congratulated the newspaper on the articles and said he hoped they "would open people's eyes."

And a Sandia High School teacher said she supported the series and suggested that unexcused absences from classes contributed greatly to problems.

One boy identifying himself as an Eldorado student complained that the articles were unfair and promised to write a letter to the editor. "How do you spell editor?" he asked before he hung up.

Perhaps the most surprising reaction was a spontaneous student demonstration at the high school. Some 1,500 students who had gathered for an assembly refused to return to class Friday morning until more discussion was heard on what could be done to break down the student body's social divisions, which had been mentioned in the series. Some students also asked how teachers and administrators could work with students to improve the quality of education at Eldorado.

But a measure of hostility toward *The Tribune* was evident. A poster circulating the school featured a caricature of myself, an ax and a chopping block.