

# PERCEPTION VS. REALITY AT KELLY HIGH SCHOOL

BY NANCY TAPIA ON AUGUST 8, 2017



Since seventh grade, my teachers and family members stressed the importance of attending a selective enrollment high school. Therefore, they placed high importance on the 7th grade ISAT exam because high schools would examine and consider me based on these results. Thus, after exceeding the standards on the ISAT exam, I thought that I had guaranteed my spot in a selective enrollment school. However, I then realized that I still needed to take another exam to ensure my entry into a “top” high school.

I registered for this exam and I ranked Whitney Young High School as my top choice. I took the exam on a Saturday morning in late January at Whitney Young. I remember being amazed at the size of the school

building. This made me feel even more nervous and intimidated. My whole education depended on this one test. Nevertheless, I hoped for the best.

Unfortunately, after a few weeks, I had received a letter stating that I did not achieve the required test scores to enroll in that school. I felt really disappointed and incompetent. I think that the worst feeling, however, was feeling like I had failed my parents. They had immigrated to the United States to give their children opportunities that they did not have in Mexico. Thus, after not being accepted to a selective enrollment school, I felt like I had not taken advantage of those opportunities. By not getting accepted into this dream school, I felt like I had not made my parents proud.

As my backup plan, however, I had the option of attending either Curie Metropolitan High School or Thomas Kelly High School. I applied to the IB Program in both schools. These schools were not that far away from my house. In fact, if I attended Kelly, then I would have to take only one bus and it would drop me off in front of the school. This short commute made it easier for me to be involved in after-school activities. Also, I had the desire to meet new people. Since I was the only one that I applied to Kelly from my elementary school and it was closer to my house, I decided to enroll there.

As I neared my freshmen year, I was starting to regret my decision. I noticed that there were metal detectors and students had to have their belongings searched. The school also required that all students purchase a clear backpack. I understood that these measures ensured safety, but this can cause students to think negatively about themselves. I also really disliked the old and not air-conditioned school building. Furthermore, a couple of weeks before starting the school year, I saw on the news that a Kelly student had died due to gang violence in the park located in front of the school. As a result, I began to believe all of the negative narratives told about my school. Everyone around me would tell me that Kelly was a “bad” school and that they thought that I would be going to a better school. This made me begin to feel ashamed that I would be attending there that fall. I was starting to dread and fear my new school.

However, after starting my path at Kelly, I realized how wrong I was about the school. I don't think there was ever an occasion where I felt unsafe in the school building. There is always security in the hallways. Teachers and staff also wait for and greet their students outside of their doors.

In terms of academics, Kelly provided me with excellent teachers devoted to the growth of their students. One of the things that I am most grateful for were the high expectations placed on us by teachers. For example, teachers always expected us to have our work neat and complete. In the long run, these high expectations made us continue to reach our highest potential and our desired goals. Teachers also consistently showed that they cared about their students. In particular, our English Teacher ensured that we were all prepared to learn by providing us with snacks in her office. Another way that she showed that she cared about us was that she offered us guidance. She often expressed that her office doors were always open. Furthermore, if there was any issue that concerned her about any individual student, she would speak to them after class and try to solve the problem together. I think that establishing this type of relationship with a student is important. In order for students to feel engaged and part of the classroom, they need to feel like their teachers care about them. In our classes, we also had the opportunity to engage with the material in different ways. We could develop videos or any other forms of presentations to demonstrate our knowledge in a specific topic. For example, in our Biology class, I created a video that presented information about eating disorders. Thus, teachers allowed us to show our understanding of the material in various ways and kept us engaged. These types of relationships and teaching practices allowed us to excel in the rigorous honors, AP, and IB classes offered at Kelly, which also prepared us for college.

Another aspect of Kelly that I really enjoyed was the after school activities. I became involved in the Dream Act Club, Peer Mentoring, Academic Decathlon, and the band program. Despite not having any experience in playing an instrument, I soon became involved in the Advanced Band and Marching Band. I owe this to my supportive band directors at Kelly. They always offered me support throughout all of my

music endeavors. They would be present during our long hours of practice after school and helped us grow as musicians. Even after graduating from high school, their ongoing support has continued.

Overall, when recalling my high school experience, I enjoyed my years at Kelly High School. As a current senior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign majoring in Elementary Education, I am proud to say that I am a product of public neighborhood schools. I have made many long-lasting friendships and have gained many people that I can approach for advice. **Attending a neighborhood high school, has also allowed me to be more open-minded. It has taught me that the most valuable experiences are those that allow new knowledge to be acquired. Based on my own experiences, I have learned that a school's area should not define the school or the student. Even though Kelly is a public neighborhood school, there are many great things that the school and its students have to offer. The negative narratives about public neighborhood schools should not discourage any student from applying to that school because they need to form their own perspectives based on their own experiences.**

**All high schools should and can thrive in providing education to our students. There just needs to be resources available to all of our public neighborhood high schools. With these resources, along with the support from our teachers and staff, all of our students can reach their goals.**

Therefore, in the future, I plan to come back to Chicago and teach in public neighborhood elementary schools in the area. I hope to provide my students with the same support, guidance, and motivation that my teachers gave me.