

Why PHS is So Special, and How It Can Stay That Way

A former Tower editor's take on Princeton High

by Rafe Kinsey, Editor-in-Chief '03

Princeton High School is a unique and wonderful place. Few other high schools in the country can challenge PHS for its combination of an amazingly talented and diverse student body, a community with fantastic resources, a tradition of strong academics, a slew of exciting extracurriculars, and a unique, unconventional atmosphere. Students enter PHS as young, starry-eyed freshmen, full of promise and ambition, and leave as independent young adults ready to thrive in the real world and pursue their dreams.

For all of these qualities, though, PHS faces many challenges in the years to come. The most obvious might be the construction project, but the deeper, more important challenges about not where but how we learn should concern us more. The first step toward facing these challenges is understanding what it is that makes PHS strong.

The phrase *live to learn and learn to live* lies written above the entrance to the school. This motto epitomizes the best of what PHS has to offer: the combination of intellectual passion with the experience and independence needed to live in our world.

It's no surprise where the living to learn part comes from. Princeton is a community of scholars, with one of the finest universities in the world, Princeton University, as well as the Institute for Advanced Study, Westminster Choir College, and Princeton Theological Seminary. Many students' parents work for or are affiliated with these institutions, naturally connecting the high school with the best of academia. Simply having a great university downtown serves as a great inspiration for the intellectual atmosphere of the high school.

Furthermore, the tremendous strength of the student body makes learning from peers easy. PHS has some of the brightest students in the state—as results from standardizing tests such as the SATs show—and sends students off to the best colleges in the country. This tradition of excellence within the school helps to establish an atmosphere where learning and intellectual activity is admired.

Finally, PHS has some of the best teachers in the business, teachers with a passion for helping their students to learn. At any public school, the quality of teaching is a mixed bag, and there are definitely plenty of mediocre teachers at PHS, but having one or two of the truly inspiring teachers can make all the difference.

But just as important to what makes PHS so special as living

to learn is learning to live. PHS has taught thousands of students how to live life by giving them a sense of responsibility and independence. Students can walk freely in the halls or choose for themselves how to spend a free period. At break, the entire student body can roam the campus. Students aren't babied at PHS. We may not realize it, but few



other high schools offer students so much freedom.

In fact, it used to be even better. When I entered PHS as a freshman, we were allowed to study and eat quietly in the halls during free periods, and the halls remained relatively quiet and clean. Even more importantly, students could cut an occasional class without facing a pink slip-wielding bureaucracy. This instilled students with the self-responsibility to take control of their own learning by not abus-

spending 180 days in a different classroom each period of the day. Four years later in college, or a dozen years later in the real world, nobody remembers the law of sines, the Treaty of Utrecht, or the details of aerobic respiration; there are far more important things to be learned in high school.

Instead, the most important learning occurs when a young athlete has the drive to dedicate himself to being the best football player he can be, when a musician spends hours each day practicing drums to get into Studio Band, when a thespian devotes herself to Spectacle Theatre, when an aspiring scientist teaches himself physics over the summer, or when a budding author writes for *Ivy* or *Tower*. In all these cases, students learn how to better themselves, to have a goal and work towards it.

One of PHS's best attributes is its atmosphere encouraging students to pursue such passions. There are opportunities for students to throw themselves into any of the dozens of clubs, performing arts groups, and athletic teams. Meanwhile, academic competitions and connections with Princeton University allow students to advance intellectually far beyond what most

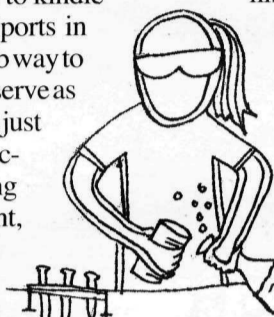
primary criticisms of the old, liberal attendance policy was that it enabled many students to get lost. In reality, though, students with little motivation to succeed in school are unlikely to be fazed by the threat of a detention.

Forcing students into class is not the solution. Instead, the key is inspiring them to perform to their utmost in life, and the way to do that is to kindle a passion within. Sports in particular are a superb way to do that; coaches can serve as great role models not just athletically but also academically. A strong guidance department, with more guidance counselors spread less thinly across the student body, would also help students keep on track.

PHS and the Princeton school system as a whole has long fretted particularly over the achievement gap that puts certain minorities far behind the rest of the school in academic performance. The school board often discusses the issue and encourages programs to remedy the gap, both at the high school and other levels. It's important for the

school; it's at the elementary school and middle school levels where most attention should be directed.

The curriculum at PHS also needs attention. Many have criticized the Advanced Placement Program for creating an overemphasis on testing and covering a strict set of material. The program isn't without merit at all—certain subjects



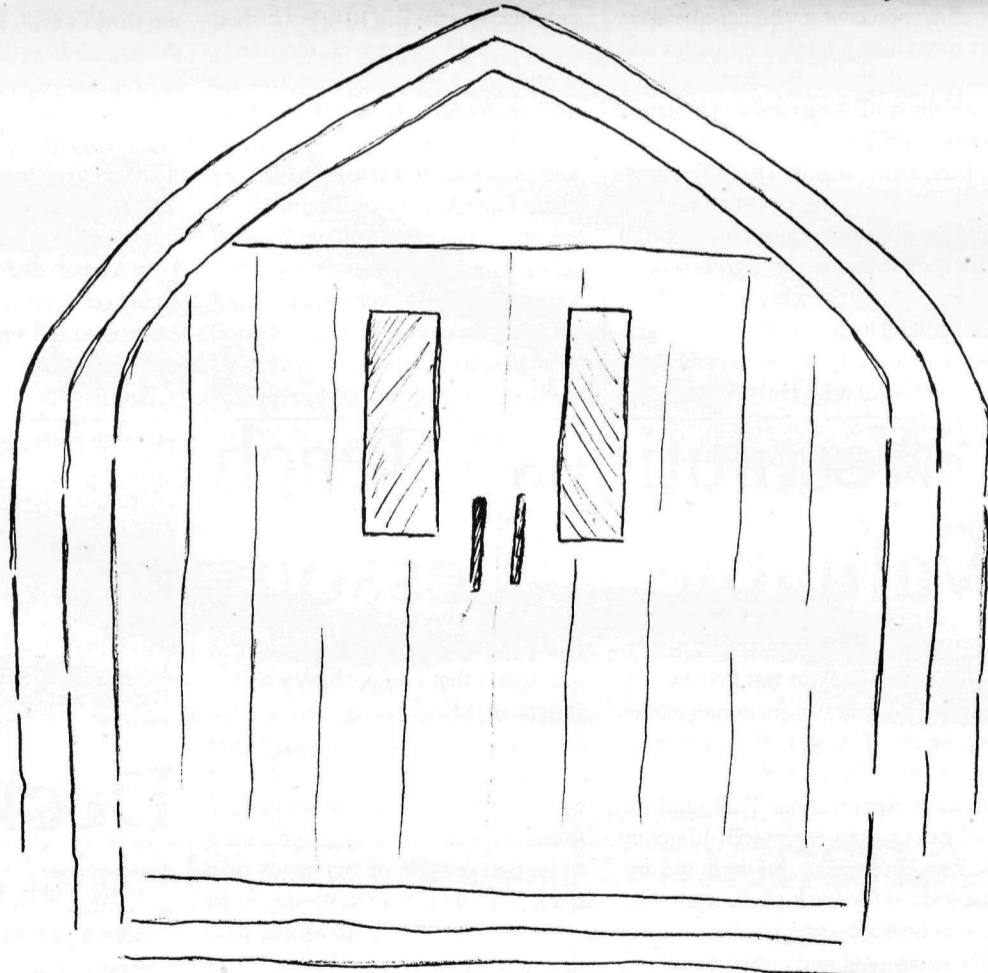
like calculus are well-suited to an AP curriculum—but, particularly in the humanities, APs limit opportunities for class discussion and in depth exploration of topics.

There is a danger that PHS is losing its uniquely independent and liberal atmosphere as the various administrations curtail student freedoms. Having teachers in the hallway to yell at students for sitting or eating quietly and the new pink-slip, detention-serving bureaucracy threaten to make PHS like the average suburban high school, where there is an "us-against-them" mentality amongst the students and the administration is seen as Big Brother. PHS has definitely slipped far in that direction in the past four years, and I can only hope that administrators see the value in restoring PHS's policy of entrusting students with independence and responsibility.

The most worrisome problem for PHS, though, is what has plagued the school for more than a decade, the instability caused by a revolving door of principals here and administrators at Valley Road. After four years of strong leadership at Valley Road, superintendent Claire Sheff Kohn is leaving big shoes to fill as she takes a job in Massachusetts. Here at PHS, principal Gary Snyder seems to have done a solid job in his first year here, wisely avoiding any quick reforms and endearing himself to the student body, but it remains to be seen how long he will stay and whether he can leave a lasting legacy at this school.

All in all, Princeton High School, like everything in life, has its ups and downs. The qualities of PHS spring from the school's unique tradition of academic excellence and student independence. The problems PHS faces mirror those of other high schools—challenging struggling students, improving curricular offerings, ensuring administrative stability. The key question over the next decade at PHS is how it will deal with these problems. The easy way out would be to ignore PHS's special attributes and make PHS like any regular high school. I hope and expect that this community will not let that happen, and that PHS will remain a place where we live to learn and learn to live. □

Live to Learn and Learn to Live



ing the privilege to occasionally miss class. Furthermore, the system provided a check to encourage teachers to make their classes more interesting. Unfortunately, these freedoms have been curtailed over the past four years, with depressingly few attempts by the student body to fight the changes.

This bureaucracy that dishes out detentions now does not understand an important fact: the most important learning at PHS does not necessarily happen in a classroom, and it definitely doesn't come about merely from

high schools offer.

This is a very rosy picture that I have painted so far. To be sure, problems exist at PHS.

Primary among them is the stark fact that, for all the success stories of PHS, there are many kids who fall through the cracks and don't get the tremendous education possible here. Some of it is inevitable; in any society, there will be some misfits. But in most of these cases, PHS could do more to help. The current method for preventing this seems to be by reining in the freedoms of all of the students; one of the

board and school officials to remember that this achievement gap isn't necessarily PHS's fault; it represents societal problems and is understandable in a school system as diverse as Princeton's. Princeton, like the rest of the country, remains relatively segregated, both socioeconomically and racially. The school system should focus less on specifically remedying this gap, and instead devote all of its efforts to improving the educational opportunities for all of its struggling or disaffected students. Furthermore, the gap begins well before high