

Visiting School Campuses

BY SARAH CARR

Spending time in schools and classrooms can be one of the best ways for novice reporters to dive into the education beat, and for veteran journalists to find fresh inspiration. While it is certainly not necessary for every story, education journalists should try their best to make time to visit schools. Classroom observations and campus tours help us come up with story ideas, fact check assertions made by school officials, develop relationships with sources, give our reporting a human dimension, and allow us to more deeply understand the beat. Much of the most meaningful education journalism ever produced originated when reporters took the initiative to immerse themselves inside schools.

Before the visit

Reporters often perceive school visits to be a right while school officials consider them a privilege, says EWA Public Editor Emily Richmond. In most cases, the truth lies somewhere between those two extremes. As a taxpayer-funded endeavor that's critical to American society, public education should be open to media scrutiny, praise, and critique. But the individuals who work and learn inside schools are typically not public figures or elected officials.

With this in mind, reporters — particularly those who do not have established relationships with a given school or district — should seek permission before showing up at a school. Depending on the district's protocols, that permission could come from a public affairs officer, a superintendent, or a principal. But showing up unannounced on a first visit is likely to incite unnecessary mistrust and suspicion. That said, reporters might have to arrive unannounced if they are covering a breaking news story (a school shooting or protest rally, for instance) or for rare investigative pieces involving alleged misconduct at a school. They may also have an established relationship with a school or district where it's understood they will visit at regular intervals.

Reporters new to the school beat might find it helpful to consult colleagues, researchers, or teachers about what to look for when they visit campuses and classrooms. There's no one right way to observe at schools, and receiving tips and suggestions from people with diverse experiences in this area can help enrich the reporting experience even for veteran education journalists. It also helps to learn the school's schedule in advance. Particularly in the younger grades, schools often schedule the core subjects before lunch so reporters could miss most of the academic instruction if they arrive in the afternoon.

During the visit

In virtually all cases, reporters should check in at the main office. The only exceptions occur in the case of breaking news or investigative reporting (a teacher, for instance, may invite a reporter for a behind-the-scenes tour to point out neglected, and dangerous physical infrastructure). Under absolutely no conditions, however, should you conceal or distort your identity or professional affiliation if asked.

Reporters will usually find it most productive to go along with the school's protocols or expectations for visitors. Some teachers might want you to sit unobtrusively in the background, while others might ask that you introduce yourself to students and even give a brief explanation of your work in journalism. Be flexible whenever possible. But remember that school officials might try to script the visit from behind the scenes, handpicking the students you speak with and the classrooms you visit. In such cases, time can be a reporter's best asset: Generally the longer you stay in a school, the less orchestrated the visit becomes. At the very least, remain aware of the way in which your view of the school might be constricted by design.

Do not feel limited to classroom observations or a standard-issue tour. Consider spending time in the nurse's office, shadowing a truancy officer, or profiling

the social worker. Take a few minutes to observe parents dropping their children off in the morning, watch the hallway action between classes, eat lunch in the cafeteria, or hang out in the teachers' lounge.

Similarly, you should strive to make your classroom observations as multifaceted and multisensory as possible. Pay attention to what a teacher has on her walls, not just the lesson she is teaching that day; watch the most disengaged and quiet students, not just the ones who participate frequently or cause disruptions; and check out the condition of school grounds and bathrooms, not just the classrooms and hallways.

It often helps to debrief with a teacher or students after watching a class. Their analysis and insight can help put events in context and allow you to better understand a lesson's strengths and weaknesses. Most teachers are open to discussing their work with candor if you have demonstrated that you are committed to a balanced portrayal.

After the visit

Follow up with teenagers or the families of children you hope to identify by name in your report. If time permits, return to the school for additional visits or interviews, particularly if you are new to the beat or district. Repeat visits will allow you to gauge how typical or atypical your visit was. For instance, if students threw objects every time the teacher's back was turned in one class, you will want to understand if that behavior is routine or exceptional before deciding whether to write about it and how. If you have spent a significant amount of time in a school or classroom, look for daily patterns rather than aberrations.

Be judicious when deciding whether to include controversial or unflattering details from your on-campus reporting, but do not sugarcoat or omit genuinely unprofessional or dysfunctional behavior. For instance, if you visit a campus eight times and witness one minor fight, it's probably not worth more than a passing mention. But if a fight breaks out during multiple visits, the report should definitely address the issue of campus safety, climate, and discipline. Similarly, if a teacher makes a typo or minor mistake, it's not worth embarrassing them in public. But if they are consistently ignorant of their subject matter (making repeated math mistakes while teaching an algebra class, for instance) or speak to students in an offensive manner, then it could become a central focus of your reporting.

In summary, education journalists should stay humble about what they do not know, and seek advice when necessary. But we should not shy away from making campus observations the core of our reporting and writing as what happens in schools represents the heart of the educational enterprise.

TIPS:

Take as many notes as possible when you are observing in a school or classroom. You never know what details will be helpful down the road.

Consider asking for permission to use a video device to record key lessons or scenes.

Sit as close to the action in a classroom as possible.

Resist the urge to check your email or phone when observing classes. Not only are you likely to miss potentially important details, but it signals a lack of interest to both students and staff.

Consider asking if you can work from a school for a length of time, making it the base of your operations rather than a newsroom.

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