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# Watsonville High: Do Chicanos get the same breaks?

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First of two parts

Does racial prejudice against Chicanos exist in the classroom at Watsonville High? Are Chicano students, who make up more than 40 percent of the student body, getting the same educational opportunities as white students?

The answer to both questions is yes and no, depending on who you talk to.

Some 40 students, 10 teachers and three administrators interviewed at the school this month gave a wide range of opinion on the questions, although some people contacted (especially teachers) expressed reluctance to discuss the issues.

Of the people who did talk, some say there's no prejudice, while others say the opportunities aren't equal, that Chicanos are getting less attention than their white classmates.

The school's 2,481 students include 978 (39.4 percent) with Spanish surnames, nearly all of them of Mexican descent. Also 9.6 percent of students are Asian and Filipino, 4.7 percent American-Indian, and less than one percent black.

While the question of prejudice and equal opportunity are intertwined, the people interviewed tended to view them as separate but related subjects. (The equal opportunity question will be explored in part two of this two-part series, scheduled to run in Monday's paper.)

About two thirds of the 20 Chicano students interviewed said they believe some white teachers are prejudiced against Chicanos, but they emphasized that such teachers are a small percentage of the total staff. Their estimates of how many teachers are prejudiced ranged from less than five percent to 25 percent.

And when prejudice is shown, they say, it may not always be obvious. A teacher may tend to give less encouragement to a Chicano student, or tend to deal with a Chicano who has misbehaved more harshly than with a white student who did the same thing.

"I've had some classes where I've had some prejudice, but it's rare," said Albert Ramirez, a junior. The prejudice was shown by a lack of attention to Chicano students, he said.

Jesse Martinez, a junior, said he hasn't found much prejudice in the academic classroom, "but I did find prejudice in P.E. classes."

Daniel Hernandez, another junior, said he's had some teachers get angry with him, "but it's not because of my race. If you make an effort, they'll help you."

Zina Hall, a senior who moved here

from Bakersfield in January, said got some surprised looks from her new teachers when they read her name on the role sheet, then looked up to see that she's Mexican-American.

Hall says she hasn't experienced racial prejudice from teachers inside the classroom, but adds that she's seen it from teachers outside the classroom, on the school grounds.

"They (the prejudiced teachers) just say, 'Get out of here.' They come on with smart talk and try to put us down, or they ignore you."

"Some teachers don't understand that Mexicans want to be treated just like everybody else," she said. "Hall believes the prejudice is only being shown by a small percentage of teachers, less than 15 percent."

Ramirez said he's heard of instances of prejudice against other Mexican-Americans. "It's not so much against me as against some of my friends," he said.

Ramirez said he believes the overall attitude of teachers toward Mexican-Americans has improved since he came to the school.

One student group that has helped the situation, Ramirez believes, is Mexican-Americans Taking Action (MATA), which was formed at the beginning of this year.

The group has organized some activities geared toward Mexican-Americans, but has also encouraged them to participate in existing school activities.

Four students from MATA said 20 to 25 percent of teachers at the high school have shown prejudice against Mexican-Americans.

"I've had one teacher who doesn't encourage Mexicans when they get a good grade," said Bertha Moreno, president of the group. "They (the prejudiced teachers) think we're dumb."

MATA members Cynthia Flores and Dee Lane say some teachers will come down harder on Mexican-Americans who cut class than they will on Anglos who cut.

"Sometimes if you walk in, they'll yell across the room at you," said Lane.

"They (teachers) aren't supposed to give you the third degree like a parent would," Flores said.

Some Mexican-Americans who get such treatment will simply stop coming to class, Flores said. "After the first experience, they don't want to get the same hassle again," she said.

"When they see prejudice, they just drop out," Lane said. Racial prejudice is a major factor behind Mexican-American dropouts, Lane believes.

Two Mexican-American students who rank in the top 10 percent of the senior class say they haven't experienced any prejudice against them.

"I've never seen any prejudice," said David Cosio. "The teachers have tried to be consistent, although I'm sure they have their pets."

Cosio said he once had a teacher who was surprised to see a Mexican-American doing well in the class. "He thought I was Italian," Cosio said.

Rosaura Jimenez, another Mexican-American student in the top 10 percent, said she hasn't experienced prejudice in the classroom, but said she's heard of it happening in other classes.

She noted that one Mexican-American graduate she knows came to the high school with the idea of preparing for college, but was placed in low level classes.

"He graduated in the top 10 percent; he beat the system," she said.

Four other students in the top 10 percent, Mickey McGushin, Ren Umeda, Richard Tuosto, and Chris Schlitter, said they hadn't seen much evidence of prejudice against Mexican-Americans. "But we can't be too naive to say there isn't any," Tuosto said.

McGushin said he's aware of "a couple of cases" where a Mexican-American student has claimed a teacher is prejudiced when there's no validity for such a claim. However, he emphasized that isn't always the case. "I haven't seen all the cases," he said.

Of 20 white students interviewed, none said they've seen prejudice against Mexican-Americans in the classroom. Half of them say there isn't any prejudice, while the other half say they've heard of instances of prejudicial treatment, but haven't seen it.

"I've heard from others that there's some really prejudiced teachers," said Brad Alexander, "but they (the

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prejudiced teachers) are in the minority."

"I was the only white guy on the soccer team this year," Alexander said. "We all worked as a team. It (being the only white) didn't bother me."

"There might be some prejudice, but not that I'd be able to see," said Paul Beilby, an Anglo.

Most students who were asked to express their opinion did so willingly, regardless of whether they were asked to give their names. Some were interviewed in pre-arranged groups, while others were picked at random on campus.

Four Mexican-American boys who were approached during the lunch period last week said there is some prejudice, but noted that it's not widespread.

"Some of the teachers do (show prejudice) but most of them are all right," said one.

"As long as you go to class, they're OK," said another.

Another boy said he's had some teachers who are mean to students, but said they take that attitude regardless of race.

Near the industrial arts building, one single girl said Chicanos "get more attention. It seems like they don't try hard, but they complain about not getting enough attention."

The girl said she hadn't seen any prejudice against Chicanos in the classroom. She said Spanish-speaking students "should learn English. They just cross the border. They don't appreciate the bilingual classes."

After expressing the view that Chicano students fall into three stereotyped categories, the girl turned toward her Mexican-American friend (who didn't seem bothered by the Anglo girl's remarks) and said, "She's just like an everyday person."

In Bill Peck's social studies class, students participated in a round table discussion on prejudice. Seven of them did most of the talking, and they tended to agree that Chicanos aren't getting prejudicial treatment from white teachers.

"They keep it pretty fair in the class-

room," said one white girl.

Another white girl said that Mexican-Americans are getting favorable treatment because of the bilingual classes being offered. (Of the 490 classes at the high school, 54 are bilingual.)

The girl noted that she wasn't complaining about the programs for bilingual students. "Of course it's for the better," she said.

"A minority of the minorities just come into class to relax," said one student. When the teacher gets tired of the student's negative attitude, "they (the student) look on it as prejudice." But, he added, the small percentage of students who come into a class "to relax" is spread across all ethnic groups.

While students were generally cooperative about expressing their views on prejudice, the same wasn't true of all teachers contacted.

Six teachers were more than happy to discuss the issue, but five others either refused to make any comment or expressed reluctance to make any comment when told their names would be printed.

Rudy Pedulla, a teacher at the high school for 15 years, believes the academic atmosphere for Mexican-Americans is improving.

"The expectations of Mexican-American students has gone up," he said. "Teachers no longer say Mexicans are low achievers. The minority student has a much better chance of improving his self-image than he did 10 years ago," Pedulla said.

"About 10 or 15 years ago, the whole cultural pride idea blossomed," Pedulla said. "A lot of kids started coming in from Mexico and doing well in school."

The idea of cultural pride among Chicanos has helped foster a desire to do well in school, Pedulla said.

"A Mexican-American student can look to his community and see that his culture is worth something," Pedulla said.

While noting that there are some bigots among both whites and Chicanos, Pedulla said the degree of interaction between the groups is good.

"We don't have a we and they," he said.

A visual inspection of the campus supports Pedulla's point. In the quad, there are more Anglos than Chicanos, while the reverse is true at the front of

the school. Spanish-speaking students tend to congregate at the side of the campus.

However, it's not a strict division. Students of all races can be found in all parts of the campus, and mixed-race gatherings of students are more predominant than groups of one race.

Rhea DeHart, who has been teaching at the high school for seven years, agrees with Pedulla. She said the ethnic makeup of the student body is "ideal," but said it's unrealistic to expect that there will never be any prejudice.

"We've placed some Mexican-Americans in some top colleges," Mrs. DeHart said. "There's a tremendous emphasis on trying to get minorities into the top schools."

But the "average student" isn't being ignored at the expense of the high achievers, Pedulla said. "There are plenty of good achievers (from ethnic minorities) in the middle leagues," he said.

Ruben Lopez, who became the school's first Mexican-American principal in September, said he's been told by a Mexican-American teacher of white teachers, making anti-Mexican-American remarks in the teacher's lounge.

Jack Raper, an Anglo teacher, says he's had negative comments from other white teachers "simply because I'm bilingual."

Raper has been to Mexico each of the last three summers in an effort to learn the language and culture.

"Some teachers have asked if they've made me a Mexican yet," he said.

At other times, Raper said, He's been in the teacher's cafeteria with some other bilingual teachers, when other teachers will ask him, "Why aren't you sitting at your table with your people?"

But Raper said the number of teachers showing such behavior "is a small percentage of the staff."

Jack Spurlock, a language teacher at the school for 18 years, said he's heard allegations of prejudice (against other teachers) through the years.

Spurlock said the allegations were hearsay, noting that he hadn't investigated to see if the charges were true or not.

Spurlock said the allegations involve less than five percent of the staff, "and the number (of allegations) has been dissipating the last few years," he said.