

# The New York Times

## More Awkward Than a 9<sup>th</sup> Grader

David Leonhardt | Nov. 7, 2016



Ashley Davis, a teacher at Match High School in Boston, working with one of her students last month.  
*Credit: Kayana Szymczak for The New York Times*

Two administrators at Match High School in Boston were taking me on a tour of the school, and our first stop was the 9th grade English class taught by Ashley Davis. We entered the room quietly and stood by the door.

It immediately became clear that the administrators wished they had picked a different class to show me.

Ms. Davis's class was listening to a recorded reading of Toni Morrison's first novel, "The Bluest Eye," and we had arrived in the midst of a rape scene, full of descriptions of genitalia. The administrators looked at me with a mix of embarrassment and regret. I pretended to be more comfortable than I actually was.

And the students? They kept their heads down, reading along at their desks with their copies of the book. Many looked transfixed, others slightly bored. None giggled or smirked.

The scene ended, and Ms. Davis stopped the tape. “I just want to praise you for your maturity,” she told the class. She snapped several times in quick succession, which is Match’s version of applause, because it’s less disruptive than clapping. She told them to answer some questions on a work sheet – to help them calmly absorb what they had just heard, she later explained to me – and then led a class discussion.

I wrote about Match [in a column this weekend](#). It’s one of the Boston charter schools delivering impressive results to mostly lower-income students. I wanted to use today’s newsletter to tell you about Ms. Davis’s English class because it underscores two big sources of Match’s success.

First, although the place oozes optimism, it also strongly emphasizes basic decency, calmness and respect – no easy goals with teenagers. Michaela Notice, a senior at the school, says that when she is on Snapchat and sees snippets from other Boston high schools, she often thinks, “Match would never tolerate that.”

Second, Match takes the art of teaching very seriously. In the back of Ms. Davis’s class that day was her mentor, a teacher with several years more experience. They regularly talk about how to get better at their jobs, with a frankness that’s underscored by a confidence in each other’s abilities.

Even the principal engages in public reflection and self-criticism, standing up in faculty meetings to talk about her missteps. “If she can acknowledge where she’s been messing up,” Ms. Davis told me, “I should be able to, too.”

There is no one secret to Match’s success, but honesty – even uncomfortable honesty – is clearly crucial.