

guest comment

A former college teacher at the high schools

Robert E. Feldman

With the paucity of tenured positions available in higher education, there is some interest in employment in the secondary schools.

I have taught nine years on the college level and wish to report my experiences in this past year of high-school teaching.

Availability of positions and tenure. Because of the greater turnover in the secondary-school system, although the number of teachers may be shrinking there are vacancies for science and mathematics teachers.

Tenure is sometimes obtainable after three years. However, high-school tenure is not as solid a guarantee of employment as it is on the college level.

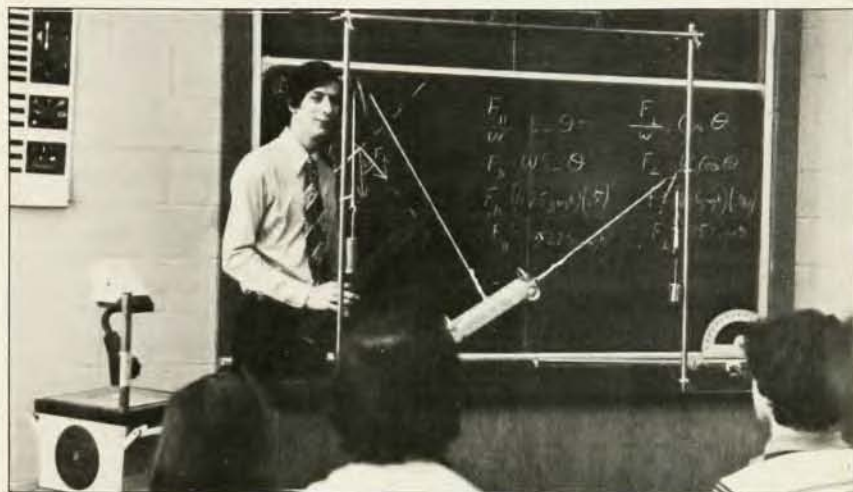
The public education budgets are highly visible—some are over a billion dollars annually—and there is a lot of political input that determines the number of positions in a local high school.

Salary and working conditions. Often there is a union contract, locally negotiated, which specifies salaries and working conditions. Compensation may range from about \$10 000 to \$25 000 (and up) depending somewhat upon education and largely upon years of experience.

A teacher's day is 6 hours and 20 minutes. During this time he generally teaches five 40-minute periods. He also meets his official class where he takes daily attendance, makes the announcements about school activities and keeps the records of each student's progress. Sometimes a teacher is assigned additional duties around the school.

A college chairman may be first among equals; a high-school chairman is clearly the supervisor of the teachers in his department. A college president is fundraiser; a high-school principal is chairman of the board—he runs the school and interacts with the influential forces of the community.

Requirements. There is considerable variation in requirements, depending upon the school district and state law. If your services are in demand, certain requirements may be waived or postponed.



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Typically, in addition to a college degree, 12 credits of education courses are required. These courses may be in teaching methods, psychology, history of education or student teaching.

Teaching physics in high school. The variation of student abilities in a typical high school is far greater than in any college. Some students will be unable to add fractions, whereas other students of the same age will be mastering differential calculus.

Most students do not take a course in physics in high school. Often there is a low-level physics course. The better students may be in an intermediate course. In New York State these students can take a statewide examination called the Regents to demonstrate their proficiency. The better high schools will also have an advanced placement course, which is acceptable for college credit at many universities.

Types of schools. The school will mirror the neighborhood it serves. Again there is a wide range. A middle-class school will have students with high motivation, intense (possibly too intense) parent involvement, high student achievement and require lengthy teacher preparation.

If the reputation of the school is high, the prestige of the teacher in the school is also high. However, in no high school is a teacher given the range of academic freedom that is permitted in higher education.

There are a small proportion of schools with incidents of violence against students and teachers. To enable a teacher to cope with disruptive behavior, these schools have an extensive security force, locked classrooms, and a fulltime policeman in the building. Here control of the class is much more important than mastery of the subject.

Personal reflections. This year has been one of difficult transition for me. Secondary schools require teaching, record keeping, and interfacing with an impersonal bureaucracy in a more pressured manner than is usual in higher education.

Compared with the positions currently advertised in physics teaching, I have earned a higher salary and have obtained greater job security.

In my first term, I taught in the slums of the south Bronx. I saw pregnant girls walking the halls, smelled the sweet odor of marijuana on the staircases and witnessed a student being arrested in the Dean's office for carrying a gun.

In my second term, I taught in the same high school where both my father and I attended. Here I stood where my teachers stood, followed traditions as they were given to me, and passed on knowledge I had gained.

Our 1979 Commencement speaker, Joshua Lederberg, is also a product of our high school. He received his Nobel Prize in Stockholm, Sweden but he received his education in Stuyvesant High School. □

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