

November 5, 2010
A Yearbook Dedicated to Inclusion
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SCOTCH PLAINS, N.J.

THE yearbook for Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School doubles as its unofficial social register: students closely study the index of names in the back and count how many times they appear.

“If you’re more popular, you’re featured more; if you’re not, you’re barely seen,” said Quentin Blackwell, 17, a co-captain of the football team who appeared five times last year. “It shows your status, where you are on the totem pole of high school.”

Not anymore. Students who saw star athletes and bench warmers alike rewarded with thanks-for-playing trophies are now experiencing new efforts to protect their self-esteem: An editor has been charged with tracking how often all 1,400 students appear in the 325-page yearbook. The goal is for every student to appear twice, in candid photos or feature stories, regardless of whether he or she is the senior class president, the yearbook editor’s best friend or the student who comes late and leaves early.

“Everyone deserves to be remembered,” said Lauren Williams, 17, the senior with the task of tracking students in the yearbook, as she scrolled through an Excel spreadsheet with 1,400 names, a few of which had already been marked off. “Whether they’re a hugely popular kid or just in their own little group, they matter to someone.”

Scotch Plains-Fanwood is one of many schools across the country remaking a tradition that has long been criticized for reinforcing a social hierarchy based almost solely on popularity — one that has left little room for those who do not fit neatly into the classic categories of best-looking, funniest or most likely to succeed.

Many yearbook advisers and editors say they are trying to broaden their coverage to accurately reflect their school populations amid larger societal concerns over teenage bullying, peer pressure and self-esteem.

The changes come as yearbook sales have been stagnating or dropping in some schools. With yearbooks costing an average of \$50 each, some hope the more inclusive approach will entice more students to buy a copy.

At North Brunswick Township High School, also in New Jersey, the yearbook staff tracks down students who miss their official portrait sittings to ensure they are still included. In 2009, a two-page spread devoted to no-shows included their excuses (“I was at the gym”).

Large schools like the 3,000-student William R. Boone High School in Orlando, Fla., try to enforce a one-time-per-person rule for candid photos and quotations, but nine slipped in twice last year. “I do not let them forget that,” said Renee Burke, the yearbook adviser. “That’s nine kids that didn’t get in because these nine were there twice.”

In California, the 32 students on the yearbook staff at Whitney High School in Rocklin routinely use e-mail, surveys and a Facebook page to find out about people and events they might not otherwise cover; as much as one-fifth of the yearbook’s content now comes from reader suggestions.

The changing yearbook is a result of a decades-old effort to foster a kinder, gentler culture through measures like smaller schools, character-building and peer counseling. “We want every student to be known and valued in a school,” said Mel Riddile, associate director for high school services for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, adding that research has shown that students are less likely to drop out when they feel connected to their school.

Rosalind Wiseman, author of the best-selling book “Queen Bees and Wannabes” (Crown, 2002), which inspired the movie “Mean Girls,” said a more inclusive yearbook not only benefited less-popular students, but also taught the students in charge of the yearbook to look through a broader lens. “They need to sit at the table and figure it out,” she said. “They need to say, ‘Hey, that person’s been in 20 times, forget it.’ These are all very important social skills to develop.”

Some have questioned whether yearbooks go too far when they try to give everyone equal coverage, regardless of how much — or how little — a student contributes to school life.

“It’s unfair to suggest that everyone should get equal time when they haven’t put in equal time,” said Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University and the author of “Generation Me” (Free Press, 2006). “Having everyone get equal time is the equivalent of everyone gets a trophy, or we’re not going to keep score, or even if we do, everyone’s trophy is the same size. There’s no resemblance to real life.”

And even schools that strive to put more students in the yearbook can fall short of their goals. “I still see plenty of yearbooks where it’s the yearbook staff, or friends of the yearbook staff,” said Logan Aimone, executive director of the National Scholastic Press Association, which runs a yearbook competition.

To avoid that result, Ms. Burke, the adviser at Boone High School, asks her 30 staff members to refrain from using pictures of their closest friends on the pages they work on. The yearbook staff itself is relegated to a full-page ad in the back of the book.

A growing number of schools, including Scotch Plains-Fanwood and Baldwin Senior High School, on Long Island, are also using new publishing technology offered through companies like Jostens and TreeRing to give every student the option of personalizing a

yearbook by adding pages to fill with photos and memories, at little or no additional cost. Scotch Plains-Fanwood's yearbook advisers, Julie Whitty and Amy Rutkowski, said they hoped the customized pages and more inclusive approach would increase their sales; in recent years, about half of the students bought yearbooks, which start at \$75 this year. They have also tried to recruit African-American and Asian-American students to their staff in hopes of gaining a more diverse viewpoint.

In yearbook class on a recent afternoon, Ms. Whitty told all 32 students to go out and take pictures of school spirit week. "And remember, please take the people who aren't going to be in there for something else," she said.

The yearbook staff also conducts student-in-the-hallway interviews to reach those not involved in school activities, with questions like, Who does not have an iPod? Who loves Taylor Swift? Who wants a longer weekend?

Even so, a few students did not make last year's book, and about 200 of the 1,400 students appeared only once, Ms. Whitty said. Active students, meanwhile, have turned up as many as nine times in past years.

Rikanya Williams, 16, a senior, said that while she had seen improvement in the coverage, she still felt largely left out: last year, she was in just one photo — a group shot of the step team. "I wanted to be in it more," she said. "I feel like a yearbook should be about you and your friends and what you endured in your year."

Ms. Rutkowski said she recently flipped through her own senior yearbook — she is a 1995 graduate of the school — and was disappointed to find herself in so few pictures. "The football players were there, and the cheerleaders next to them," she said. "And there was me — the band geek — in the corner, literally, if I even made it that year."

Ms. Rutkowski has only to look at her husband's yearbook, from 1994, to see the difference. "He was much more popular," she said. "He made the candid; he made everything. I always say, 'How did you ever notice me?'"