

The Paris attacks

When students are 'freaked out' by news, social studies faculty stay calm & teach on

By George Basler
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

On the Monday after the terrorist attacks in Paris, Mamaroneck social studies teacher Susan Chester did something she rarely does in her classroom. She set aside her lesson plan.

Instead, Chester showed her students a news report about the attacks prepared by CNN News, which produces programs for middle schools and high schools across the country.

"I think anything people are talking about, and kids are seeing in the news, is important to talk about in school," said the 17-year teaching veteran, who is president of the Westchester-Lower Hudson Council for the Social Studies.

Chester was among many teachers across the state who used the Paris attacks as a "teachable moment." After letting students express their feelings, teachers led discussions that related to issues covered in class.

In the Union-Endicott High School in Broome County, ninth-graders in global studies classes had been studying world religions, so they discussed how suicide bombers interpret — and, many would say, misinterpret — the Islamic concept of jihad.

Anxiety about the ramifications of the Paris attacks was high, according to teacher Kyle Wolf. "Students in four of my five classes specifically asked me if this was going to be the beginning of World War III," he said.

Students in Wolf's honors U.S. history course debated the question. They found nationalism, imperialism and entangling alliances, but they concluded that today's global community is more interdependent than fractured.

Calming concerns was a priority for Katie Argus, a social studies teacher at the Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central in Syracuse. Several of her students were "freaked out" by the Paris attacks and wanted to talk, she said.

Argus focused, in part, on the need to evaluate information from the media for its validity and accuracy. She had students do research and engage in question and answer sessions.

Good information was the antidote for irrational worries, she said. "I think I dissipated some of their fears."



In a vigil in Germany, thousands mourned victims killed in the Nov. 13 attacks in Paris, France. In the background, Berlin's Brandenburg Gate is lit in the French national colors. — AP photo by Markus Schreiber

Better the classroom than the blogosphere

Students tend to get news from social media, which worries some teachers.

"Anytime something happens in the blogosphere or social media I want my kids to be aware of it and not get information from biased sources," said Christopher

Students asked, "Could this be the beginning of World War III?"

Ognibene, a global studies and U.S. history teacher at Schenectady High School.

With this in mind on the Monday after the Paris attacks, Ognibene did a lesson on the origin and history of ISIS. His students knew little about the organization, he said.

In his U.S. history classes, Ognibene also did a lesson comparing and contrasting Syrian refugees with European immigrants who came to the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries to escape poverty and the lack of social mobility in their native countries.

"Whenever you can connect what's happening today to what you're teaching in a course, it makes it more relevant," he said.

Rich Pyszczek, a social studies teacher at City

Honors School in Buffalo, agreed.

"Seminal moments happen, and when they do you have to stop what you're doing and connect the outside world to the classroom," he said.

In the days after the Paris attacks, students in his International Baccalaureate (IB) economics class discussed the economic impact of terrorism, while his IB human geography class discussed the role of religion in terrorism.

Like a presidential debate (yes, that bad)

In Julie Geronimo's Participation in Government classes at Maine-Endwell High School, students discussed the same issue the presidential candidates are debating: immigration and refugees. And, like the presidential debates, some of the rhetoric got heated. Geronimo said she had to cut off two students who began insulting each other over the question of Syrian refugees.

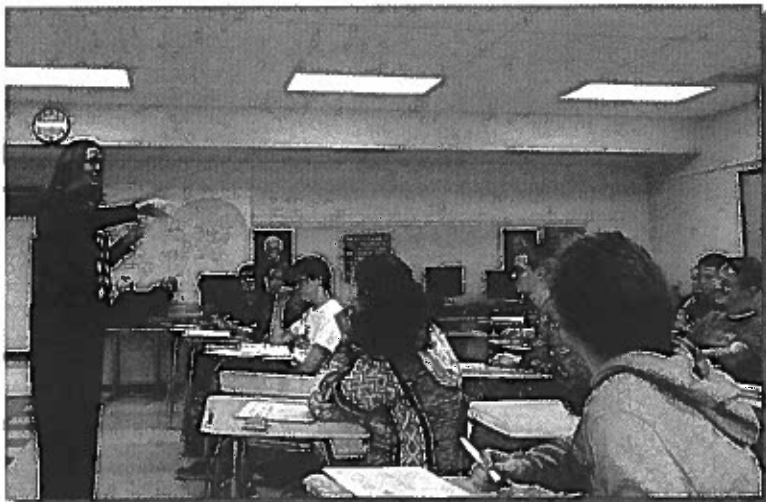
And, as was the case with other teachers interviewed for this story, Geronimo said she tried to keep her personal opinions out of lessons. "It's not my job to do that (share opinions). My job is to foster their knowledge so they can create their own decisions," she said.

Even as they discussed the Paris attacks, however, teachers were aware that the time they could spend is limited because of the need to cover all the material in the state's social studies curriculum and prepare students for end-of-the-school-year examinations.

Most teachers interviewed for this story spent a day or two on the Paris attacks, then moved on to other material.

Departing from the curriculum to talk about current events is important because classrooms are a space where students can begin to ask important questions and practice how to be informed citizens, said Peter Nelson, New York director for Facing History and Ourselves, a national organization that trains history teachers.

"If the classroom is not a place to have these discussions, they won't happen at all," he said.



After the Paris attacks, Maine-Endwell students discussed geopolitical issues including U.S. policy on Syrian refugees. Teacher Julie Geronimo made sure the debate stayed civil.

— Photo courtesy of Maine-Endwell Central School District