

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

### High Schools to TikTok: We're Catching Feelings

Source: Taylor Lorenz, NewYorkTimes.com, October 19, 2019

On the wall of a classroom that is home to the West Orange High School TikTok club, large loopy words are scrawled across a whiteboard: “Wanna be TikTok famous? Join TikTok club.”

It's working. “There's a lot of TikTok-famous kids at our school,” said Amanda DiCastro, who is 14 and a freshman. “Probably 20 people have gotten famous off random things.”

The school is on a quiet palm-tree-lined street in a town just outside Orlando. A hallway by the principal's office is busy with blue plaques honoring the school's A.P. Scholars. Its choir director, Jeffery Redding, won the 2019 Grammy Music Educator Award. Amanda was referring to a different kind of notoriety: on TikTok, a social media app where users post short funny videos, usually set to music, that is enjoying a surge in popularity among teenagers around the world

The embrace of the app at this school is mirrored on scattered campuses across the United States, where students are forming TikTok clubs to dance, sing and perform skits for the app — essentially drama clubs for the digital age, but with the potential to reach huge audiences. And unlike other social media networks, TikTok is winning over some educators, like Michael Callahan, a teacher at West Orange, who had never heard of TikTok before the students told him about it.

He is an adviser to the school's club and said he loves how the app brings students from different friend groups together. “You see a lot more teamwork and camaraderie,” he said, “and less — I don't want to say bullying — but focus on individuals.”

In many of the videos on the app, which are 15 seconds to a minute long, school hallways, classrooms and courtyards serve as a recurrent backdrop. And if kids aren't filming themselves at school, they're making jokes about school. One popular meme on the app mocks the class of 2023 (freshmen this year) for being cringey and trying too hard.

“TikTok is such a theatrical platform,” said Blake Cadwell, the general manager of Day One agency, a marketing firm in Los Angeles that works on Chipotle's TikTok account. “You're trying to build your cast for whatever you're doing, and high school is a natural environment where you're with lots of people, so you can do these skits or challenges.” (A big part of TikTok culture, challenges are videos users create that riff on an of-the-moment meme.)

Several students at West Orange have seen their videos shoot to the top of the popular “For You” page of the app. In the spring, the school's valedictorian went viral for a Minecraft video; another student got more than three million views for a parody of the film “Mean Girls.” Ireland McTague, a 15-year-old sophomore at St. Agnes Academy in Texas, said she spends about 16 hours a week on the app, creating or consuming videos. Manny Alexander, 16, a high schooler in New York, said he would diagnose himself as a TikTok addict. “Not that it's interrupted my life,” he said, “but my life does revolve a bit around it.”

TikTok's addictiveness can be traced, in part, to its use of artificial intelligence to anticipate what users want and fill their feeds with it. That technology is so effective that the app's owner, Bytedance (a Chinese tech conglomerate), last year introduced anti-addiction measures in Douyin, the Chinese version, to help both users and the parents who may be worried about them.

#### Inside the West Orange High School TikTok Club

The West Orange club meets every other Monday after school. It was founded in September by Kate Sandoval, a 17-year-old senior. Mr. Callahan, the adviser, makes sure the students come up with an agenda for each meeting and don't just sit around goofing off on their phones.

Kate pulled up a series of TikToks on a large screen. The students sipped Capri Suns and snacked on Cheetos as they watched. The first TikTok featured a teenager, whose face was obscured by the image of a giant crying baby's face, dancing to “Teach Me How to Dougie” in the aisle of a sporting goods store.

The second showed a skit between two boys, in which one jokes about falling for the other after he slides past him to exit a bus seat. (This is a popular meme for boys; the punch line is a song lyric: “Oh no, I think I'm catching feelings.”) The challenge for the week was to riff on these videos. The winner would receive a Chick-fil-A gift card.

In the hallway, pairs of girls propped their phones against the wall and attempted to mimic the “Teach Me How to Dougie” dance step by step. Inside the classroom, three boys and two girls prepared skits about catching

feelings for each other. Amy Sommers and her TikTok partner, Kaylani Heisler, a 16-year-old senior, danced until they began sweating. “This is hard work!” Kaylani said between steps.

Shane Skaling, 17, who is the TikTok club videographer, tracked a pair of girls’ dance moves between lockers. He moved the camera around in circles, hitting the beats as they danced. “We finished ours, it’s fire,” said Darcy Friday, 17. Her partner, Morgan Townsend, 17, agreed.

The school’s principal, Melissa Gordon, declared a winner. It was a skit by three 16-year-old boys — Benjamin Boucher, Trent Vickers and Zachary Everidge — about one boy falling in love with another boy, who picks his nose. The entire classroom screamed and cheered when the winner was announced. “I feel like it might go viral,” Benjamin said.

### **‘If It’s on the Internet, It’s Not Private’**

Creating TikToks in class isn’t exactly encouraged, but teachers at many schools say they view TikTok culture as a net positive. Others, like Emma Peden, a Spanish teacher at Fox Creek High School in South Carolina, are more hesitant. “Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat — all those interfaces — can feed bullying,” she said. “I think kids can be recording things that they shouldn’t.”

One encouraging sign is that videos about topics that high schoolers are all studying sometimes generate thousands of views and become memes in themselves. Kate Sandoval said she has made TikToks for her role in student government, and Mr. Callahan, the adviser, is mulling how he can use the app to teach students about government and social studies. “We’re thinking this is possibly the new Schoolhouse Rock,” he said. “There’s a lot more than just funny videos,” Kaylani Heisler said. “I see countless ways to take notes, get organized. I see chemistry study aids.”

Students occasionally involve their teachers in TikTok stunts, and many educators have set up their own accounts. Sarah Jacobs, a physics teacher at San Jose High School in California, said some of her students made TikToks explaining Newton’s Laws for extra credit last year. St. Agnes Academy in Texas has begun releasing musical clips every Tuesday during its morning broadcast. “Students make a TikTok to the sound, then the next Tuesday they post the one that they like the most,” said Ireland McTague, the sophomore there.

Whitesboro High School in New York incorporated TikTok memes like VSCO girls — slang for a subculture involving a lifestyle of scrunchies, Hydroflasks and environmentalism — into homecoming week theme.

Some schools block access to TikTok, along with all other social media apps, via the school’s Wi-Fi systems. At West Orange, Mr. Callahan and other educators take steps to educate students on their digital footprint. Students are instructed to think twice before posting anything online.

Outside the room where the TikTok club meets, paper speech bubbles hang with messages: “Google yourself”; “If it’s on the internet, it’s not private”; “They loved your G.P.A.; then they saw your tweets.”

“I think you just have to engage students in whatever they’re interested in,” said Ms. Gordon, the principal. She likes how the app has unlocked creativity and authenticity in the students.

“On other media you’re hiding your flaws,” Mr. Callahan said. “Here you’re showing them off.”

Aaron Eddy, 17, a senior at Whitesboro High School in Marcy, N.Y., said that it’s the authenticity part that he thinks makes the app so compelling. He said he likes how he can be “crazy” on it without judgment.

Morgan Townsend, a 17-year-old senior at West Orange, said that she makes TikToks of notable life moments for the memories. “During homecoming week we’d take a clip of our outfits every day, and it was fun to watch the end of the week,” she said.

Ireland McTague said, “TikTok is a safer space where you can post videos about you being yourself, rather than worrying about being perfect.” She contrasted it with YouTube and Instagram, where more polished presentations are the norm.

(As with those platforms, there is a potential for inappropriate use of TikTok by predators. To protect users, a TikTok spokeswoman said, the app has safeguards like “privacy settings, controls over who can view or interact with content, and in-app reporting.”)

Harper Kelly, a 17-year-old senior at Milford High School in Ohio, said, of her school TikTok club, “The last TikTok Tuesday, the room was split in half, one half of the room was watching TikToks, the other half was people doing dances and making them.”

The TikTok club at Fruita Monument High School in Colorado has its own TikTok account, @TikTokClubbbb, an early club that appears to have spawned others. Dennis Allen, a 17-year-old senior and club member, posted a TikTok, on which one respondent, Sophie Furdek, wrote: “I started TikTok club at my school.”

### **Possible Response Questions:**

- What are your thoughts on schools embracing TikTok? Explain.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.