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Book Review

School of Dreams: Making the Grade at a Top American High School by Edward Humes



Reviewed by: Jake Thomas*

Humes, Edward. *School of Dreams: Making the Grade at a Top American High School*. Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003. 400 pp. \$14.00 paperback.

In the world of high school principals, superintendents, school board members, and politicians there is one thing that matters more than anything else: standards. Schools rise or fall based on their ability to meet these superimposed benchmarks. When a school consistently meets the objectives demanded of them, they gain the most valuable piece of capital a school can acquire: a strong reputation. When it comes to American high schools today nobody, many would argue, beats the reputation of Whitney High School—nobody. Or at least, according to Edward Humes.

Whitney High School, located in the Los Angeles suburb of Cerritos, is repeatedly hailed as California's best public high school. Some would even claim Whitney is deserving of being named America's number one public high school. The students fill their schedule with advanced placement classes, along with SAT Prep coursework. They pad their academic résumés with volunteer hours and extra-curricular activities, praying this effort will be enough to get into one of the many Ivy League schools they apply to.

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Whitney is not a typical public high school. It competes every year with the nation's private academies, and its students are routinely sought out by the top universities and colleges. In a day and age when "successful public education" is considered an oxymoron, many believe Whitney serves as the model that will resurrect the image of public education in America. Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Edward Humes, interested in what life is like for the students, faculty, and administration that make up Whitney, decided to spend an entire school year observing the inner workings of the famed high school. As a result, he offers the reader a sort of behind the scenes look at what a typical school year looks like at this "school of dreams."

Humes shares his profile of Whitney in three sections. The first and third sections deal with Humes' day-to-day interaction with Whitney's students. He listens to students as they share their personal saga of going through the rigid Whitney system. The reader gets the sense that the students are not ecstatic about the journey, but they nonetheless are bound by a common pride in Whitney's successful model of education. This is showcased in the verbal lashing that Neil Bush, brother of then-President George W. Bush, took from Whitney students when he cast doubt on the usefulness of subjects like calculus.

And although the reader does get an effective perception of the pressures that go along with growing up in California's top high school, it is the story of Whitney's transformation (part II of the book) from a progressive public high school offering eclectic classes to a rigid system that places emphasis on standards and a traditional curriculum that sociologists will find insightful and useful. Humes in effect gives the reader a fascinating sociological case study that highlights numerous areas of importance to the field: race, demography, social inequality, and politics.

Whitney came out of the “schools without walls” movement of the 1960s and 1970s that advocated for a less rigid system of learning that would bring out the creative talents and ideas of the students by offering, among other things, more eclectic classes. Whitney, at that time called the Whitney Community Learning Center, was set up to test this “schools without walls” idea in California. Other schools in the district, objecting to any sort of outside competition, rallied together to make sure that Whitney could only offer electives, not a full educational program to its students. This was done to ensure that the other traditional high schools in the district still got to keep their full-time enrollment numbers high, while still letting Whitney function. This fear of competition is, in part, due to the system of school funding. The fewer students in your school, the less funding you receive. Thus, any serious competitor could end up taking substantial amounts of dollars away from the other schools. This sets up one of the many paradoxes of our modern educational system: overcrowded, underfunded public schools need smaller enrollment, which in turn could jeopardize their funding.

Schools surrounding Whitney encouraged their least successful students to partake in the electives offered at Whitney but kept their strongest performing students in the traditional curriculum. These attempts were made in order to effectively shut down Whitney as a competitor. The surrounding schools knew that if Whitney didn't have the students, it couldn't survive.

Whitney did not retreat from the obstacles posed by the traditional high schools in the district. It dropped the progressive model of a “school without walls” and instead transformed itself into the very school such an idea was supposed to counter: a rigid school system that focused on traditional, basic curriculum. Whitney also took the drastic step of setting up an admissions test for entry into the public school. Whitney wanted the best and brightest, and the only way to get them was to identify them.

It is because of this model that Whitney has become the academic idol it is today— or at least what its supporters contend. Unfortunately, such an explanation is too simplistic in depicting an understanding of the complexities of society. Humes doesn't effectively relay to the reader the important role socio-economic factors play in education, as well as in society as a whole. This understatement gives the reader an impression that Whitney is some sort of *primus inter pares* when it comes to public high schools. However, for a whole host of reasons, Whitney is not representative of the majority of California public high schools, let alone the nation as a whole. The very fact that socio-economic factors are not given the attention they so richly deserve means that any attempt to use Whitney as the poster child for how today's public high schools should perform is careless at best.

The importance that socio-economic factors have played in Whitney's excellence goes hand in hand with rising consumerism of public education. Again, *School of Dreams* offers the reader an inside look at how these two important factors come together to make a visible change in the educational system of the area.

Whitney needed students in order to function, so it began to market itself as a haven for the best and brightest young minds. It dropped the progressive ideals of its founders and instead revamped its curriculum to match the "back to basics" movement that was being touted at the time. It set up the admissions exam—which was not prepared in a scientific matter, but instead put together by Whitney teachers one summer—to test the area's sixth graders in order to find out who was Whitney material. It's somewhat disingenuous to view Whitney's transformation as a philosophical reversion to a failing system. In reality, the transformation had more to do with marketing than with grand ideas of education. The product was the chance for Cerritos' children to graduate from a high school with a reputation second to none— and the parents did everything they could to "consume" that product.

This means that the competition is extremely great when it comes to getting into Whitney. Humes details how the school district to which Whitney belongs saw a substantial increase in population growth—mostly Asian American families looking to take advantage of a public school with a private school reputation. The influx became so great that the school district implemented a racial quota system that aimed to boost Black, Latino, and White enrollment at Whitney. The quota system was eventually dropped after California voters banned such requirements for schools.

Humes thankfully does note that the administrators of the surrounding schools believe that the fact that Whitney uses an admissions exam for selection its student body gives them an unfair advantage when it comes to what sort of students they have to deal with. It is their belief that the makeup of the student body—not the curriculum and standards— has made Whitney what it is today. Whitney responds by showing that their academic success began *before* the change in the student body and that it was this previous success that had drawn families toward the school. Be that as it may, the existence of an admissions process for a public school will undoubtedly give an unfair advantage when it comes to which kind of students enroll. From a sociological point of view, this leads to a form of class system in which, in this case, Whitney resides at the top with the best and brightest, while other schools are turned into a sort of second rate school system.

The admissions process also allows Whitney to conveniently control the size of its student body, while other public schools are not granted such a luxury. Therefore the race to gain acceptance to Whitney has spawned an industry within this school district that gives the reader a valuable look at how consumerism has worked its way into American education. For example, once families began their educational exodus to Cerritos, companies began to see a golden opportunity in tutoring elementary students for the Whitney admissions exam.

Numerous tutoring agencies claimed to have the secret to scoring well on the exam. The families who could afford the private tutoring for their sixth grader flocked to these centers in order to guarantee that their child would one day become part of the Whitney legacy. Eventually, the fervor over the exam became so grand that rumors of cheating began to plague the once impenetrable reputation of Whitney. Despite an embarrassing public investigation into the matter, the reputation recovered and families continued to travel half way around the world just to give their kids the chance at enrolling at Whitney.

In the end, *School of Dreams* offers the reader a look at the complexities surrounding what makes America's top high school function. And although many will find the sections of the book dealing with the feelings and thoughts of the students to be the most interesting, it is the second part of the book that offers the most insight for sociologists. And despite Humes' failure to give the sociological factors the importance they deserve, the book is still recommended for the overall story it tells of the transformation of what is now hailed as California's top high school.