

Book review
John Rim 1946

Edward Humes
School of Dreams:
Making the Grade at a Top American High School
[Gretchen Whitney H.S.]

In the summer of 1977, the principal decided to make popularity the end---and selectivity the means. For the sake of survival. "You've got to get the enrollment up, "said the brand-new district superintendent to the relatively-new principal. "We have to fill it or close it." The principal was persuaded by a guidance counselor---at another school---to make the school smaller temporarily, so as to make it (eventually) much larger---and viable. This counselor was the wife of the principal at Whitney, and she cared very much about Whitney although it was not the school where she was employed. She had the objectivity of an outsider.

The re-invention that began just before the summer of 1977 was virtually complete by the time the school re-opened a few months later, in September 1977. Although the re-invention continued from time to time thereafter, the heart of the matter occurred in the summer of one year. In a few months

To better understand what happened in Cerritos, California, during June, July and August of 1977, I am providing a description here of the school a bit earlier---as of May 1977. The Whitney Community Learning Center had been modeled on another learning center, in Texas, by the previous district superintendent, who then retired. That superintendent had planned to enroll 1,000 students but only 300 or so actually did enroll. This new learning center in Cerritos operated on all grade levels---from pre-K to 12 and beyond. Like a community college, Whitney was open to adults living in Cerritos. It simultaneously catered to some struggling students---who needed remedial programs---as well as some so-called smart pupils considered to have "untapped potential." The learning center "offered eclectic classes and practical training "including culinary arts, floral arrangement, architectural drafting, reading and child-care. The learning center also operated a so-called commercial kitchen and a "working restaurant." All this in one building which was "wide-open and

warehouse-like," and had been outfitted with interior walls that could be moved at will. About 300 students occupied a space big enough for one-thousand. Most students of high-school age spent part of every week at the learning center and the rest of their weekly school-hours in one of three traditional local public "comprehensive" high schools. They enrolled in the usual mix of required and elective courses: a few required courses---such as English, algebra, biology, health, history of California ---and many electives. Some Whitney students in grades 9 to 12 did not actually attend another public high school. Instead, they attended nearby high schools that charged tuition and were church-affiliated or private.

The re-invention, accomplished hurriedly (in one summer) and with no fanfare, was intended to make Whitney popular by making it selective. At first, most students and parents did not know what was happening. Principals at other local schools were kept in the dark. So was the school district's Board of Education. To make Whitney selective and therefore popular, an admissions test was hurriedly designed and produced by a few teachers, for administration to all prospective students at the beginning of September 1977. The principal organized and supervised this effort. Some applicants were admitted BUT ONLY TO GRADES 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 AND 12. Other applicants were informed that they were not admitted. The original curriculum was not carried over from the school's first year. Instead, a brand-new curriculum was introduced for grades Seven to Twelve---very rigorous and very pre-collegiate. Whitney's teachers were informed of new conditions for employment, suitable to the new and very rigorous pre-collegiate curriculum. Some teachers opted to stay. Students were required " to maintain a grade point average above 2.5 " in the light of a newly-introduced grading system : A, B, C or F. Any student who did not was immediately on academic probation. Any individual on academic probation was given personal tutoring most intensively. After two consecutive semesters of tutoring on academic probation, a student was forced out of Whitney and returned to another local high school, " the home school. " Another innovation : " driver's ed " and sex education were available only during a summer session. Study-skills training was added, without a fee. SAT prep was added, without a fee. The principal introduced a widespread effort to improve the school's local image and its reputation among colleges, including the Ivy League." If we're not ranked well by the colleges, people are still going to look down on us. And we'll be

gone." Whitney rapidly became a smaller school with much more focus on academic excellence.

Edward Humes School of Dreams Making the Grade at a Top American High School Harvest Book Orlando Austin New York San Diego Harcourt 2003.

The next pair of reviews will be the book by Ralph Keyes, *Is There Life after High School?* And the book by Robert Rossner, *The Year without an autumn: Portrait of a School in Crisis--about the Bronx High School of Science*

some years ago. When there is a book about Townsend Harris High School at Queens College, I will review it. Meanwhile, bear in mind that the alumni rescued this school from oblivion. In conclusion, I will mention a so-called BxSci 2020 Planning Process that is to consider the next rejuvenation of Science, with significant alumni participation included in a planning process. One possibility is irreverently called Goldie Green and the Seven Miniscules. This is a plan to down-size and up-grade at the same time by substituting seven more-specialized high schools of science, side by side by side by side, for the one large and generalized science high school we have now.

Today's Science has about 2,500 students. Each of the seven miniscule's will have about 375 students and one principal for each miniscule---a total of seven principals. The underlying idea is to make each of the schools more personable and to improve working relationships between principal and students---and teachers---and parents, too. For example: Each principal will know the 375 students by name. Each student will have an adult advocate. The principals will provide the kind of leadership we have not seen since the days of Dr. Morris Meister, the first principal. The target date is the year 2020, the end of the next decade that begins in 2011.