Another Planet: A Year in the Life of a Suburban High School
By Elinor Burkett

Brief Intervals of Horrible Sanity: One Season in a Progressive School
By Elizabeth Gold
Tarcher/Penguin, 2003, $15.95; 336 pages.

Class Dismissed: A Year in the Life of an American High School, a Glimpse into the Heart of a Nation
By Meredith Maran
St Martin’s Griffin, 2000, $14.95; 256 pages.

School of Dreams: Making the Grade at a Top American High School
By Edward Humes
Harvest Books, 2004, $14.00; 400 pages.

Wonderland: A Year in the Life of an American High School
By Michael Bamberger

Reviewed by David Ferrero

Much has been written recently about the deplorable state of the American high school. Commissioned reports, journal articles, data displays, and assorted charts and graphs tell us that high schools are at best obsolete and at worst human-rights atrocities. Graduation rates are appalling. Curricula are incoherent. Access to good schools depends on what zip code a family can afford to live in. Such analyses recommend higher standards, better teachers, smaller schools, more Advanced Placement (AP) classes and better assessments, usually without considering the actual experience of the people who inhabit our high schools.

For those of us who traffic in policy fixes for a living, it is worth asking: What do today’s high schools look like from the inside? What impact have the various policy machinations over the past generation had on today’s students and teachers? Those of us without the time or inclination to relive high school can choose from a small range of books published over the past several years by noneducators (usually journalists) who, provoked by events at Columbine, piqued by their own children’s high-school experience, or simply in need of a job, took a semester or a year off to revisit the scene of so much youthful Sturm und Drang. The five books under review here cover a lot of ground: suburban and city, both coasts and the Midwest, conventional high schools, and alternatives to them.

What makes these volumes particularly valuable for professional reformers is that they are written by people who hadn’t previously thought much about high school except as a piece of their pasts. They have no current professional stake in how or whether high schools are reformed. And so they offer reasonably unbiased portraits of people—teachers, administrators, students—whose lives are nonetheless affected by the action or inaction of advocates and policymakers. From their stories emerges a fleshy and nuanced profile of the American high school at the turn of the 21st century.

From Berkeley to Prior Lake
Career reformers might start with Meredith Maran’s Class Dismissed and Elinor Burkett’s Another Planet, the two books in this set that come closest to the familiar jeremiads against comprehensive public high schools. Maran profiles Berkeley High School, a large urban school in the California city made famous by free speech and now considered by many, says Maran, to be “the most integrated in the country.” Burkett focuses on Prior Lake High School in a suburb of Minneapolis. Both spent a year in their respective schools listening in on classes, conducting interviews, documenting key events, and following small numbers of students and teachers. Both organize their retellings as chronicles spanning one academic year.

The contrast between the schools is remarkable. Where Prior Lake enrolls a little over 1,000 students, more than 90 percent of them white and only 1 in 20 on free or reduced-price lunch, Berkeley houses 3,000 students, one-fourth of whom are low-income and two-thirds of whom are nonwhite. These different locations and demographics play out in ways one would expect concerning the relative salience of race, violence, community politics, and so on. For example, where Prior Lake grapples with an assortment of
minor pranks and ritual subversions on the part of disaffected students, Berkeley High confronts an arsonist whose fires pose an escalating safety threat to students and staff.

But it is the similarities that stand out. Both books, for example, highlight the ways in which schools reflect and reproduce the social stratifications of the communities that constitute them. Maran, a writer and mother of two Berkeley High graduates, tracks three students in particular: a biracial girl who needs to work to support her single-parent family, an affluent white boy, and a black football player who aspires to an athletic scholarship. Though they all wrestle with personal problems—for example, the affluent student suffers from depression brought on by the death of his father, who suffered from a drug addiction—their experiences within school vary in predictable ways. The athlete, we discover, is relegated to dead-end remedial courses and is allowed to persist in his delusion that his athletic prowess will win him a full ride through college; his experience prompts Maran to explore in some detail how academic tracking and other more subtle differences in teachers' expectations contribute to a situation where 60 percent of white Berkeley High graduates attend a four-year college, while only 14 percent of black students earn enough credits to do so.

Surprisingly, it’s similar at Prior Lake. Burkett slices the student body up by subcultures, each experiencing school in a different way. Drawn to her project by the Columbine shootings, Burkett, a journalist and professor at the University of Alaska, pays special attention to the disaffected students. One such student is Tony Lorentz, an alienated upperclassman and modestly talented poet who in his three years at Prior Lake has made high craft of cynical slacking, going so far as to codify his behavior with rules such as “show up for class and pay any semblance of attention.” Burkett documents many such students and conversations, exposing a subtle “conspiracy of low expectations,” by the students themselves, that is all the more striking because of the school’s relative affluence.

Burkett introduces us to a pleasant, well-run school led by a committed and capable principal, staffed by well-credentialed teachers, and attended by mostly well-cared-for kids. If any place should serve as a model of what a comprehensive high school could be, Prior Lake is it. Yet no matter what the adults do in the name of standards, or equity, or the whole child, it somehow comes out muddled and uninspired. Numerous attempts to coax students out of their shells, engage them in important issues, and motivate them to perform on tests fall flat. It’s not as if the adults in the building are ignorant or indifferent. In fact, they wring their hands constantly about the situation, flirting with every innovation in the reform literature, from zero-tolerance policies (an overreaction to Columbine) to self-esteem building. As the story unfolds and incidents accumulate, a striking subtext becomes evident: Prior Lake proves neither a bastion of progressive education nor a traditionalist stronghold, but an ad hoc blend of the worst of both, implemented by well-intentioned adults and ignored, resisted, or ridiculed by students who see right through every ploy and contradiction.

Stand on Your Head in Cerritos

At Edward Humes’s School of Dreams, by contrast, the students care a lot about their schooling. Based on his yearlong experience in 2001–02 at Whitney High School, an ethnically diverse 7–12 secondary school in Cerritos, California, and one of the highest-performing high schools in the state, Humes describes a well-oiled achievement machine. Humes, a writer and Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter when he was at the Orange County Register, has mostly good things to report about his experience at Whitney. The diverse student body is cohesive and purposeful. Teachers are committed and competent. Curriculum
and instruction are more often engaging than not. Parents, though at times overbearing, support their children and the school. The school consistently produces some of the highest scores on state exams. Families move to Cerritos from all over the world so that their children can attend the school.

And when the school gets these kids, it seems deft in its handling of their quirks and adolescent acts of defiance. When a student known for outlandish dress and provocative accessories (such as an Army ammunition box turned lunchbox) began carting a beach chair to classes, her teachers conferred with the principal, who remarked, “If she’s doing her work and not disrupting the class, I don’t care if she stands on her head.”

Later we see a teacher struggling to engage her initially indifferent and distracted students in a discussion of the First Amendment. She tries one tactic after another, until she finally connects when a student’s vague memory of Horatio Alger stories from U.S. history resonates with her class full of immigrants and children of immigrants. The discussion finally takes off. The skill and persistence of its teachers are another reason why, from the classroom up, Whitney seems to have cracked the code: a diverse, comprehensive high school in a modest facility and below average per pupil allocation that not only works, but excels. It seems almost too good to be true.

Unfortunately, it is. For there is one other secret to Whitney’s success: it is a selective school. Because of its genesis as a quasi-experimental school (founded in the 1970s), it won the prerogative to admit students from the district based on fit and aptitude. The policy resulted almost immediately in a brain drain from nearby schools. But Whitney survived the backlash that ensued and has grown more competitive ever since.

The place works because everyone wants desperately to be there. This not only makes Whitney anomalous, it also results in its own perversities, mostly in the form of hypercompetitiveness and sometimes overwhelming stress on the part of students, who resort to strategies for survival that undermine faculty efforts to make their learning meaningful. The school’s drama teacher sums it up to a group of first-year teachers: “We have great kids here, wonderful students…. [But] you gotta remember. Some of our kids cheat. Big time.” The foregoing classroom examples notwithstanding, Humes observes repeatedly the ways in which pressures of Whitney’s overheated academic culture interfere with students’ education.

Taking New York

Which brings us to Elizabeth Gold, an out-of-work writer who took a job as a 9th-grade teacher in the pseudonymous School of the New Millennium, in New York City, in the spring of 2000. The resulting book, Brief Intervals of Horrible Sanity: One Season in a Progressive School, is not especially well written, and some critics have complained that she betrayed the school and its students by writing her book without their knowledge and consent. It deserves a reading, however, because of what it reveals about the inner workings of an urban school self-consciously created as a better alternative for students without the advantages of their counterparts at Whitney.

What Gold encounters in this alternative school is discouraging: ill-prepared and resistant students, discipline and attendance problems, curriculum incoherence, high-minded professional jargon obscuring compromised expectations, teaching quality driven largely by individual charisma, inadequate professional mentorship, little parental support, a conscientious but overwhelmed principal and staff, racial tensions, union issues, dilapidated facilities, a general spirit of malaise. As a teacher, Gold struggles to establish authority in her classes and generally fails, through hubris and rookie ineptitude; her students ritually defy her, going so far as to openly declare their intention to get her fired for the sheer sport of it. Her principal and colleagues do their best to advise her on the fly, but they
are too overextended themselves to provide sustained guidance. A gnawing sense of futility sets in.

New Millennium’s staff members are laudable. Most deliberately chose to work there because they wanted to serve disadvantaged students and because they thought they could do so more effectively in an alternative setting governed by a well-developed sense of what constitutes “best practices” unfettered by bureaucratic constraints. Gold documents what all this translates into in practice. Her colleagues admonish her to “teach students not subjects”; they cajole their students with frequent reminders that they are the “leaders of tomorrow”; they defer to students’ “learning styles,” talk ceaselessly about diversity and culture and self-esteem, and remind one another that “every child is a learner, every child must be reached.” As Gold’s own difficulties mount, and as she observes how unevenly her colleagues apply these nostrums, they begin to ring hollow to her. To the reader who comes to New Millennium after Burkett’s Prior Lake, they also ring familiar: while Prior Lake drew on a more muddled mix of proposed remedies to its woes, in general its leadership and staff had internalized the same normative vocabulary as those at New Millennium, with similarly mixed results. The reader fluent in education argot and familiar with the warp and woof of high-school life can’t help but wonder whether the alternative differs much from the status quo.

A Wistful Past in Fairless Hills

The despondent reformer might be tempted to turn for succor to Wonderland: A Year in the Life of an American High School, by Michael Bamberger. A writer for Sports Illustrated, Bamberger spent the 2002–03 school year tracking students and teachers at his alma mater, Pennsbury High School, a nonselective school in Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, a small, mostly white working-class town eight miles southwest of Trenton, New Jersey.

Similar to Prior Lake in both size and demographics, Bamberger’s Pennsbury seems a throwback to a time when working folk led prosperous lives and built thriving communities around local institutions like the public high school. The students themselves experience the same difficulties as kids in the other schools profiled. Two seniors, Rob and Stephanie, face an out-of-wedlock birth; Bobby Speer, captain of the football team, needs an athletic scholarship to attend college, but has a mediocre season as well as a complicated home life, including an absent father and a younger brother who was born with spina bifida.

Yet most of the students at Pennsbury do not seem to exhibit the penchant for willful defiance that features so prominently in some of the other books, and at year’s end most things turn out all right. In this respect, Wonderland is a refreshing read. Upbeat, optimistic, apolitical, willing to showcase what’s good in today’s high schools where most commentators carp about what’s wrong, Bamberger makes the reader forget to notice that in the course of 214 pages he scarcely mentions anything having to do with the core academic mission of the school. In fact, the entire book is organized around the yearlong effort that goes into planning for the prom, which, having been showcased once in Reader’s Digest, is nationally famous for its extravagance.

Though Bamberger tends to focus on the most sociable, self-motivated, and resourceful students, the more engaged and caring teachers, and their extracurricular passions, there is an important lesson here for the career reformer: those aspects of schooling that our wonkish tendencies decry as trivial distractions—proms, sports, parades—serve as important glue, bonding school, students, and communities. We ignore them at our peril. Nonetheless, the book’s upbeat tone should not distract us from the fact that it provides no insight into how to improve day-to-day instruction.

Policy Lessons

Most of these authors attempt to conclude with some insights about the meaning of high school and suggestions for how to improve it. Maran offers a five-point plan focused on desegregation, better pay for teachers, and more community and family involvement. Good ideas, certainly, but nothing new. And though Humes is nuanced in his handling of the tensions internal to Whitney, his attempt to use the school as a model for nonselective schools is fanciful.

Gold and Burkett take different tacks, focusing less on what’s wrong with the schools and more on what’s wrong with efforts to reform them.
Both observe the contradictory demands placed on schools by multiple constituencies and the contradictions within some of those constituencies. Gold notes, for example, how the demand that urban schools intervene directly to overcome the effects of poverty on achievement results in a proliferation of site-based social-service programs—clinics, counseling, rehab centers, family interventions—whose maintenance can overwhelm the instructional mission of the school. “No wonder providing intellectual instruction gets lost in the shuffle,” she quips after quoting a colleague’s observation that “90 percent of what I do is social work anyway.”

Burkett is more searing. She convincingly captures the multiple problems and equally numerous proposed remedies that schools are contending with and attempting to make sense of: zero-tolerance policies and self-esteem curricula, standardized testing and grade inflation, back-to-basics mandates, and calls for more cooperative learning. She recognizes how each news-making catastrophe (like Columbine), each new lawsuit, each new professional fad, reform campaign, or organized interest group brings with it a new set of imperatives, which schools must struggle to sort, reconcile, and implement. “Ultimately,” she writes, “it’s a miracle that schools like Prior Lake can function at all when we, as a nation, haven’t decided what we want them to be or do, but feel free to beat them up for not meeting all our contradictory expectations.”

Burkett and Gold seem to be saying that despite considerable success at galvanizing reform elites around a vision of high academic standards for all, the overall environment that high-school educators have to negotiate is no more coherent or manageable today than it was 20 years ago. This is a critical insight. The observation is not that government is inept at running schools or that teachers are incompetent or lazy. It is not that schools are underfunded or inequitably funded or that racism and poverty are too overwhelming to overcome. At the end of the day, she argues, the high schools we have are the high schools we’ve asked for. From inside the echo chamber—universities, think tanks, foundations, professional associations, and business alliances—it’s easy to believe that a consensus exists over what’s wrong with high schools and what they ought to be. It doesn’t. Not yet. And this remains arguably the greatest hidden impediment to the sorts of changes those of us inside the echo chamber seek.

The second big insight to emerge from these books is the degree to which students themselves sabotage their own education. The reform literature shies away from an honest examination of this, preferring instead to portray the students as ill-served victims of an uncaring, unfair system. Maran’s profile shows that the reform literature has a point. To suggest, though, that students themselves bear some responsibility for the quality of their education is tantamount to blaming the victim. So it is with growing dismay that, despite reading about many hardworking and sometimes overstressed students, one comes across story after story in these books of others who openly, defiantly, even gleefully prey on inexperienced teachers or assiduously resist everything their teachers do to reach out to them. It is distressing to see how hard many of the teachers in these pages work to engage their classes and how often, unless they stumble into something serendipitous or have extraordinary finesse and charisma, things go bust. These accounts reveal a crisis of authority at the heart of schooling so far unaddressed by the usual policy remedies.

High schools are incoherent. Teacher quality is uneven. Deep structural inequities contribute powerfully to unequal opportunities for students. These and other well-documented causes of failure are confirmed within the pages of these engaging books. But being blissfully unaware of the taboos that constrain the professional reform discourse, these authors also have license to observe what those of us within the echo chamber cannot: that the kids themselves, and many of the adults who claim to speak on their behalf, are too often their own worst enemies.

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