book review

Inside the Testing Factory
Some schools make it work

Tested: One American School Struggles to Make the Grade
By Linda Perlstein

Henry Holt and Company, 2007, $25.00; 320 pages.

“It’s Being Done”: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools
By Karin Chenoweth


As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

No Child Left Behind, aside from its other effects, has generated a new kind of “successful schools” book, one which looks at schools that have done better than expected on mandated state exams. Linda Perlstein spent five years writing on education for the Washington Post and decided to research one such school. Tyler Heights enrolls 300 students, kindergarten to 5th grade, in Annapolis, Maryland. Half of its students come from housing projects. It is just the sort of school it was hoped would be improved by the legislation. In 2000, only 17 percent of the children performed satisfactorily on a state exam. A new principal, the central figure in Perlstein’s story, arrived that year. At the end of the 2004–05 school year, 86 percent of the students passed Maryland’s test in reading, 92 percent passed in math; black and Hispanic students were almost up to those figures. What could explain such remarkable change, and could it be maintained? Perlstein spent the following year studying the school. Its incredibly hard-working principal, often at the school from 6:30 AM to 10:30 PM, and its teachers hardly rested on their laurels. They focused all energies on the state tests to come in March.

Karin Chenoweth, another former Post reporter, took a different course in tracking school success in unlikely circumstances. She searched for schools that exceeded state tests what was expected on the basis of their social composition. She reports on 14 such schools, elementary, middle, and high, scattered throughout the country. Of course her accounts cannot be as full or intensive as Linda Perlstein’s study of a single school. One gets immersed in the life of Tyler Heights; there is no such effect possible from the brief studies in “It’s Being Done.”

Is one reason for the success of schools with low-income children the quantity of resources that we may be able to invest in one public school? Astonishingly, for its 300 students, Tyler Heights had a staff of 43, only 18 of whom headed classes. Title I helped employ many of the additional specialized staff and also enabled acquisition of copious teaching aids and supplies, ordered in an end-of-the-fiscal-year rush. One wonders how typical this is. I note in a New York Times article that a failing Newark school of 487 students has a staff of 79, including 33 teachers, similar in student-to-staff ratio to Tyler Heights.

But as the Newark school demonstrates, such resources do not guarantee success. Most striking in the account of Tyler Heights is the detailed prescription of the curriculum and how it should be taught. A new superintendent had imposed Saxon Math and the Open Court reading curriculum on the Annapolis schools. The teachers—more than half are in their first or second year because the school loses so many each year—come in fresh and with great enthusiasm for ways of teaching they will not have a chance to exercise. Emissaries and consultants from the central office impose or propose ways of teaching. One introduces the teachers to “explicit instruction,” weekly lessons completely orchestrated for the teacher, from what questions she should ask to what answers she should look for. “A line drawing of a bank teller popped up on the PowerPoint, and the presenter enthused, ‘A bank teller could pick up the lesson immediately.’”

The principal mutters under her breath, “Why not just go and hire a bunch of bank tellers?” She had just spent the summer trying to get the most qualified and creative teachers to come to Tyler Heights.

Finally, the tests are over (the results come months later), and Tyler Heights explodes into what the teachers and Ms. Perlstein believe to be real education—science and social science, arts and music, field trips. The kits they have ordered and never had a chance to use are opened. “It Feels Like a Different School” is the title of the chapter describing life after the tests.

In striking contrast is a school of similar social composition, successful on state tests, that Karin Chenoweth describes in “It’s Being Done.” This school is also in a condition of post-exam-stress relaxation. The students mill around, the teachers are without energy, the principal—in contrast to the admirable principal of Tyler Heights—is not present. When she arrives, and Chenoweth joins her to visit classrooms, the classrooms are
noisy, and the principal yells unprofessionally at disruptive students. She explains apologetically, “Once the state tests are done, we don’t do a lot of instruction—we’re doing field trips and getting ready for the end of the year.”

What explains the difference from Tyler Heights, with its high morale, despite being tightly run, and its joyful explosion in new educational possibilities after the mandated tests? Chenoweth suspects the high scores of the dysfunctional school she presents in contrast to her other successful schools “had not been attained in a legitimate way.”

It is not clear what she has in mind. Actual cheating? The schools that have achieved their unexpectedly high scores in what she feels is a legitimate manner are so varied, in size, in region, in their approaches to curriculum and instruction, that it is not easy to extract general rules from her accounts. (Only one is an E. D. Hirsch Core Knowledge school.)

The book does end with 26 generalizations, beginning with “They teach their students” and “They don’t teach to the test,” and ending with “To sum up: The adults in ‘It’s Being Done’ schools expect their students to learn and they work hard to master the skills and knowledge necessary to teach those students.” From my reading of the 14 case studies I would rate high the role of energetic and committed principals. But they don’t show up in Chenoweth’s list until item 17: “Principals are a constant presence.”

I wonder what Chenoweth would think of Tyler Heights. It certainly “teaches to the test.” It does expand into other kinds of activities when the tests are done, but its principal and its teachers seem steadily in control. The schools in Chenoweth’s sample, from my reading, also take the tests very seriously. From the more detailed account of a single successful school in Linda Perlstein’s book, and other accounts, one has the impression the teachers chafe under the requirements of the tests. But the tests are the coin of the realm: it is they that permit Chenoweth to select her school sample, and the results increasingly drive our judgment of schools. There is a lot of ideology in the criticism of the large role of tests. Yet I find it troubling that the judgment of so many teachers is that the tests distort what they feel they should be doing and ideally what the schools should be doing. Would better tests—perhaps those tracking the child rather than the grade or the school, as have been proposed—help resolve this conflict? They might. But if our most creative teachers do not seem to be enamored of the testing regime that now dominates the schools, this is something that needs further and systematic exploration, beyond even excellent ethnographic and journalistic accounts.

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