

A Novel Take on K–12 Schooling

Droll look at school life offers clear-eyed candor

Adequate Yearly Progress:

A Novel

by Roxanna Elden

Rivet Street Books, 2018, \$14.99;

318 pages.

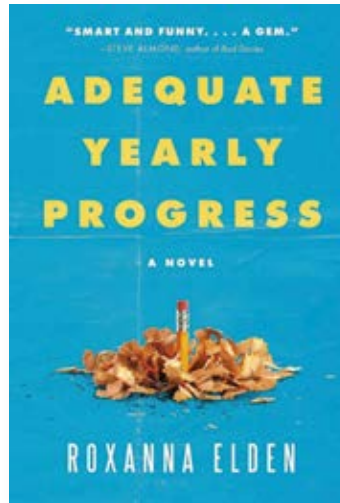
As reviewed by Frederick M. Hess

There are remarkably few good, adult novels about K–12 schooling. Authors seem unable to escape the go-to narrative, about a heroic educator fighting the “system” on behalf of plucky, downtrodden kids. The result: formulaic tales populated by earnest, cardboard do-gooders.

This is kind of surprising, given that schools are intense, frequently funny places. They’re populated by hundreds of children, rife with adult drama, and bombarded by rafts of bizarre directives. It shouldn’t be that hard to tell an insightful, amusing story.

So, what’s the problem? I’ve long suspected that the saccharine tales are an all-too-human inclination to wax sentimental about the hope that schools represent. While understandable, this impulse makes it tough to talk sensibly about schooling. Indeed, it’s fair to ask whether such an impulse plays a role in the faddism, overreach, and self-righteousness that have long been hallmarks of school reform.

All of which makes Roxanna Elden’s new novel, *Adequate Yearly Progress*, a welcome departure. In her tale of goings-on at Brae Hill Valley High School, Elden offers a droll take on the posturing and cheerful self-deception that plagues 21st century American schooling. A longtime teacher, Elden is decidedly skeptical of reform, mocking Teach For America, data-driven instruction, education consultants, charter schools, and celebrity superintendents. But she’s just as tough on district bureaucrats, teachers unions, guilt-infused political correctness, lax



discipline, and low expectations.

More than anything, though, this is a book that subverts expectations. After an opening that seems primed to launch a couple of young, impassioned educators on the usual hero’s journey, the story veers in unexpected directions. No adorable moppets get saved, and the teachers seem profoundly, sometimes pathetically, human. None of this will come as a surprise to those familiar with Elden’s previous book, the wry, nonfiction teachers’ guide *See Me After Class*.

Elden’s writing is honest, sometimes uncomfortably so. Of protagonist Lena Wright, an English teacher, she observes:

Nothing brought Lena into more direct contact with her own disillusionment than tutoring low-level readers. She had entered teaching expecting students who, with the right question or book recommendation, would demonstrate some untapped well of deep, original thinking. Instead, she’d found that teenagers who had never read a full book were unlikely to share original thoughts.

Of Wright’s principal, Dr. Barrios, Elden writes:

Adequate Yearly Progress. He turned the phrase over in his mind . . . The first word was where they got you, he decided. *Yearly* and *progress* were concrete terms. But *adequate*? That was the moving target. Adequate was the part that got decided in an office somewhere . . . based on what would look good in the newspaper.

Now, it’s not a great novel. Some characters feel stilted, there’s a lot of incident that doesn’t lead anywhere, and the ending ultimately feels rushed and a little disjointed. But it’s an immensely readable novel. It helps that Elden is amusing, and has a nice knack for backstories and for the feel of a teacher’s lounge or faculty meeting.

The book centers on Wright and a passel of her colleagues over the course of an academic year. Things kick off when their school, Brae Hill Valley High, is ensnared in the “Believers Make Achievers Zone” championed by the district’s new celebrity superintendent, Nick Wallabee. The story draws on memes that will be instantly familiar to anyone who has tracked school reform efforts over the past decade, including energetic bloggers, a *Waiting for Superman*-like movie documenting Wallabee’s heroic efforts (*How the Status Quo Stole Christmas*), bee-eating teachers, hot-shot consultants, motivational slogans, and all the rest.

Elden’s tale suffers from its reliance on a vaguely conspiratorial view of celebrity reformers, big publishing, and school choice—all of which are embodied in Wallabee and the ravenous corporation (Global Schoolhouse) that avidly markets him. This all comes across as a bit of a fever dream, but the story is well-served by Elden’s decision to keep most of it off-

stage as a barely-glimpsed, peripheral plot device. And, however cartoonish the caricatures, they still tend to ring true.

Plenty of educators will grimace in recognition when Elden writes, “The festival had caused such a surge of innovative energy in Nick Wallabee that he’d called this emergency meeting to announce the Curriculum Standard of the Day Achievement Initiative.”

There’s TV host Melinda Morningside who, in the course of her “Education Sensation” special, enthuses, “It looks like ninety-eight percent of you said our children’s success is either important or very important. Wow, this is an audience that cares about kids!”

Elden has great fun with consultant Daren Grant, of Transformational Change Advocacy Consulting Partners, who explains, “I realized that to really scale up and make that macro impact for low-income students, I’d have to step out of the classroom,” and that, “We have abundant data on best practices that work in the startup sector . . . which we’re using to innovate and catalyze disruptive change.”

While she’s especially tough on the agents of “reform,” Elden is willing to gore every ox. She even skewers sensitive tropes concerning race and equity that many would hesitate to mock. In an all-too-convincing send-up of a Teach

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For America training (reinvented in the book as “TeachCorps”), Elden amusingly depicts the rhythms of a passive-aggressive bragging contest:

“As a person of color myself,” said Amantha-am-I-pronouncing-that-right, “I’ve found that sharing my first-hand experience with educational inequities has helped me invest students in my high expectations of them.” The contest

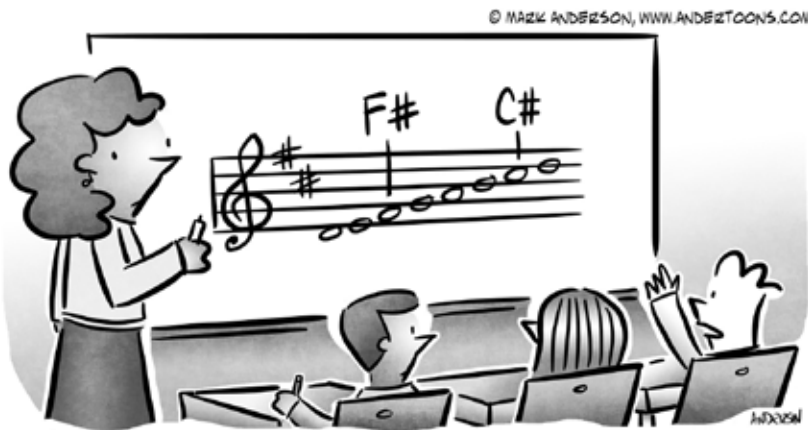
ended abruptly. The non-person of color thought partners in the room shared a shudder of collective defeat.

Elden is tough on Teach for America, but she’s equally acerbic when it comes to district bureaucracy and teachers unions. She describes union steward Mr. Weber “looking at his watch, ready to evoke Statute III, Item 4 of the teachers’-union contract: *Thou shalt not keep instructional staff detained in meetings past the time of 3:40 p.m.*” She notes that, “Attending a union meeting was like watching a choir performance in which the most off-key singers stood closest the microphone—and performed a series of solo numbers.”

Some of what’s most appealing is Elden’s willingness to offer observations usually considered too gauche to share in polite company. On the subject of high school football, few other authors would dare to observe, “After all the lectures from teachers . . . and other warnings about how no one ever makes it in football, an interesting thing sometimes happens. Every now and then, someone makes it in football.” Indeed, Elden’s may be the only book about 21st century schooling in which an old-school, foul-mouthed, racially insensitive football coach emerges as a wise, generous character.

In the end, Elden brings the realities of contemporary schooling to life. *Adequate Yearly Progress* isn’t inspirational and doesn’t offer any answers. If it’s ever made into a movie, it’ll be more *Office Space* than *Mr. Holland’s Opus*. Some readers will likely find the book frustrating in its dogged refusal to get with the program—and yet, for all that, many, many others will find this a refreshing and much-needed blast of clear-eyed candor.

Frederick M. Hess is director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute and an executive editor of Education Next.



“Normally the hashtags go in front.”

CARTOON/MARK ANDERSON