Tale of Two Cities

Why do minorities do so well in Raleigh and so poorly in Syracuse?

Hope and Despair in the American City: Why there are no bad schools in Raleigh

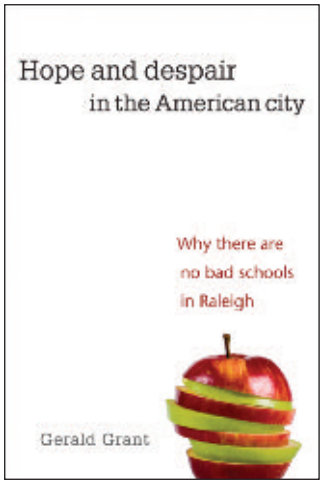
By Gerald Grant

Harvard University Press, 2009, $25.95; 226 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Syracuse, New York, does not appear in the title of this book, as Raleigh, North Carolina, does, but its experience is the reason for it. Author Gerald Grant was born in Syracuse and educated through high school there. He lived for years in Washington, where he became education reporter for the *Washington Post*, and in the Boston area, where he gained a doctoral degree at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and worked with Daniel P. Moynihan, David Riesman, and the writer of this review. Grant returned to Syracuse in the 1970s to become a professor at Syracuse University. He has lived through and experienced, as observer, analyst, and deeply involved citizen, the decline of Syracuse similar to the slide experienced by northeastern and midwestern industrial cities in the last half century. One part of the story of that decline and the brave attempts at reversal and recovery has been told in his excellent 1988 book, *The World We Created at Hamilton High*. The canvas is greatly extended in this volume.

The story of Syracuse is familiar: misguided attempts at urban renewal in the 1960s, destruction of old neighborhoods by interstate highways penetrating the city center, expansion of suburbs facilitated by federally funded highways and tax benefits for new housing; movement of many industrial facilities to the South; and redlining of old city neighborhoods so they could not get necessary mortgages and insurance for home purchase, rehabilitation, and maintenance. The resulting separation between white suburbs with new schools and middle-class students and an increasingly minority central city are all vividly recounted by Grant, who with his wife was deeply involved in efforts to counter the decline, and who in one neighborhood had some success in doing so. But in the end, there remains an ailing minority-dominated school system in Syracuse in which fewer than 3 of 10 8th graders pass state tests in reading and math.



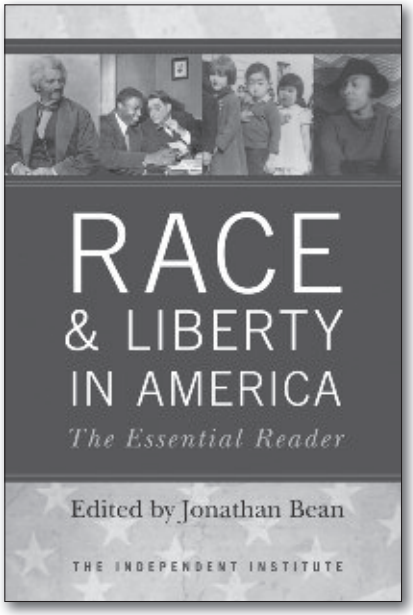
And then there is Raleigh, where more than 8 of 10 pass, and the visiting researcher is told—and it seems true—"there are no bad schools in Raleigh." (State requirements, of course, do vary widely, and North Carolina's are among the least rigorous, but even so the differences between the two cities are huge.) One of the first schools Grant visited in Raleigh, in the historic black district, serves a student population that is majority black with one-third of children from low-income families. The school nevertheless "attracted whites from across the county to its [magnet] programs in art and science. In 3rd grade 94 percent of white children and 79 percent of blacks passed the state math test. By 5th grade 100 percent of both blacks and whites passed the test." There are very few such public schools in northeastern and midwestern cities of similar size. And if there are, they are generally in rapid transition to becoming all-black. There may be the occasional KIPP or charter school that is predominantly minority and scores high. But Grant is describing a traditional public school, and all Wake County public schools seem to be similar in achievement and attractiveness.

"County," there is the rub, and the explanation, according to Grant. Raleigh did not resist the mandates of *Brown v. Board of Education* as fiercely as other southern cities. Grant records a degree of good race relations even under the reign of Jim Crow in Raleigh that seems exceptional, although the schools were separated until the late 1960s. "Whites began to bail out of the system in the 1970s, as they did in Syracuse…. The line dividing the inner-city schools from the growing suburbs 'had been frozen by the county,'" the black former superintendent of schools tells Grant. "We were locked into the inner city. The black count in the Raleigh schools was approaching 40 percent."

But then, in 1976, without any court order or apparently any threat of one, the Raleigh city and county schools merged to create the Wake County School System. And that created the basic underlying condition that Grant believes made possible the remarkable success of the Raleigh–Wake County schools. Of course, more was necessary: vigorous and energetic superintendents, strong efforts to create magnet schools and to attract high-quality teachers and principals, publicity to draw students to them. A touch of the iron fist in the velvet glove, a program

Inspiring and Insightful

NEW



352 PAGES | $24.95 PB | $50.00 HC
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

"If you are interested in the real history of the civil rights movement in America—the radical ideas that set it in motion no matter where they came from—get ready for an intellectual thrill ride. There is no time for political posturing here. ***Race and Liberty in America*** is full of revelations and stunning in its honesty."

—**Juan Williams**, Senior Correspondent, National Public Radio

Offering a new perspective on race and segregation, this authoritative new anthology traces the history of American civil rights from 1776 through the "Age of Obama."

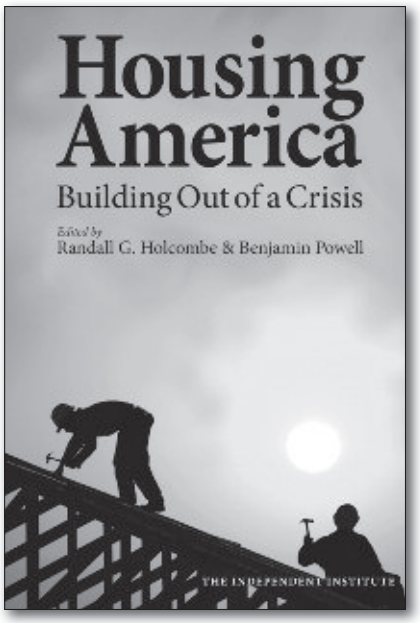
Including foundational documents, writings, and speeches by the great classical liberal pioneers against racism, many of whom helped to create the modern civil rights movement—from NAACP superlawyer Moorfield Storey, frontier novelist Rose Wilder Lane, and black Republican congressman Oscar DePriest, to Frederick Douglass, Warren G. Harding, Milton Friedman, and Zora Neale Hurston—selections cover such diverse topics as the fight for abolition and the allied struggles against abuse of native Americans, Japanese internment, Jim Crow, and other racial distinctions in the law.

"***Housing America*** is a welcome collection of essays by skeptics of government interventions in housing markets, a counterweight to the writings of those who urge ever greater state involvement."

—**Robert C. Ellickson,** Walter E. Meyer Professor of Property and Urban Law, Yale University

Although most housing in the United States is allocated in the private market, this market is heavily regulated and subsidized, with government policies dictating whether people can build, what type of housing is permitted, the terms allowed in financing and rental contracts, and much more. Involving the work of sixteen economists and policy experts, ***Housing America*** critically examines government policies in the United States and how they impact housing at all levels.

Could government's pervasive involvement in housing be related to the very real problems of affordability, availability, mortgage defaults, and much more? If so, the appropriate policy response would be to significantly reduce, not increase, government involvement. ***Housing America*** is the most comprehensive book available on resolving the housing crisis.



474 PAGES | $29.95 PB | $59.95 HC
TRANSACTION PUBLISHERS

The INDEPENDENT INSTITUTE

100 Swan Way • Oakland, CA 94621-1428 • 510-62-1366 • Fax 510-568-6040

ORDER TOLL FREE
800-927-8733

ORDER ONLINE
www.independent.org

of assignment of students to schools by race sought to prevent black dominance, but affected it seems only a small number of pupils. More recently, this has been replaced by balancing schools according to socioeconomic status, limiting the number of students in each school eligible for subsidized lunches to under 40 percent (see "Fraud in the Lunchroom?" *check the facts*, Winter 2010) to evade the possible judicial striking down of a race-based program.

Syracuse did not merge with suburban districts, and even resisted any voluntary program, such as METCO in the Boston area, that permits inner-city black children to transfer to willing suburban school districts. It is astonishing that the Wake County and Raleigh schools merged, and I wonder whether there is even one other example of such a merger independent of legal pressure.

What were the circumstances that made possible this remarkable event in Raleigh–Wake County? There are no details in the book. I am informed that merger was rejected in a local vote, and then imposed by the state legislature. But even this is remarkable. (One should note that countywide school districts are more common in the South, which may have made easier the state vote and the acceptance of a countywide school district for Wake County.)

And then what made possible the equally remarkable success of the magnet schools, which enabled racial balance with little in the way of direct assignment? This has not been the common experience of other districts with magnet-school programs. In particular, one thinks of the Kansas City experience, as described in Joshua M. Dunn's *Complex Justice* (see "Finding the Right Remedy," *book review*, Spring 2009). Huge sums of money were appropriated by Missouri under court order to build and rebuild inner-city schools and establish magnet programs to draw suburban white children, with nothing like the success we witness in

In 1976, without any court order or apparently any threat of one, the Raleigh city and county schools merged to create the Wake County School System.

Wake County. Everywhere, except in the most exceptional cases, we have seen the resistance of suburban white parents to sending their children to inner-city schools with near majorities or majorities of black children.

Grant is well aware this resistance is not a product of simple racism and is more to be ascribed to parents wanting the best for their children. But then why is Raleigh–Wake County different? One hesitates to jump to the conclusion that Wake County and Raleigh are simply more enlightened, liberal, and tolerant than most American communities. And if they are, what can explain it?

One explanation might be that Raleigh was growing by leaps and bounds, economically and demographically: North Carolina was attracting some of the industry that was leaving Syracuse. While we are not given the specific figures, apparently the percentage of black students—and concentration in the inner city—was similar in Syracuse and Raleigh. Growth may have created optimism and concern over maintaining it with the good schools that integration facilitates, and that may have contributed to the success of the merger effort. Blacks and whites in Raleigh, we get a hint, were not as separated geographically as in Syracuse, reflecting a common southern pattern. Raleigh is the state capital and that certainly anchors to some degree a middle-class population. But what happened in Raleigh was so exceptional it deserves further analysis.

There are hints in the book that this exceptionality is now threatened. A local woman—who moved in 1989 to Raleigh with her young children from Lexington, Massachusetts—heads Assignment by Choice, an organization that attacks the pupil assignment policies that keep the Raleigh schools in socioeconomic (and racial) balance. "Her campaign started…after her son was rejected several times to schools she had hoped would help him with his attention-deficit and hearing problems." Her efforts to get supporters elected to the school board at first failed, but a local election in October 2009 gave the board a majority of neighborhood-school supporters.

And there are other clouds: The number of families from Mexico and Central America is rising. The percentage of schools with more than 40 percent subsidized-lunch students has doubled in six years. Grant devotes a good part of the book to the story of how a Supreme Court with four Nixon appointees in 1974 stopped a program to bring together Detroit with its suburbs to make possible a greater degree of integration in the Detroit schools, and thus called a halt to a constitutionally imposed merger of central-city and suburban schools. But could anything have saved such mandates given the fierce popular opposition to school busing at the time?

Nor has this weakened much over the years. Despite the remarkable story of how the Raleigh–Wake County schools raised the achievement of black school students, this is still a task that in large measure will have to be accomplished in black and minority-dominated schools.

Nathan Glazer is professor emeritus of education and sociology at Harvard University.

Total Student Load

Maybe worth a longer look, but hardly a revolution

The Secret of TSL: The revolutionary discovery that raises school performance

By William G. Ouchi

Simon and Schuster, 2009, $26; 336 pages.

As reviewed by Eric Hanushek

When I first saw the title, never having heard of TSL, I thought this might be a late-night infomercial about a new diet supplement designed to make all students attentive. Not far into the book, I discovered that TSL was Total Student Load, which, unfortunately, did not help me very much. Then to the hypothesis on the cover: The key element of a school's organization is the number of students that a teacher regularly sees (TSL), and if this number is small (say, 80), achievement will be high.

The hypothesis is really an assertion based on a vaguely described analysis. And while it is a discernible undercurrent throughout the book, TSL is not the volume's central feature. The book presents a series of case studies of large, and distinctly nonrandom, districts. Within those case studies, the focus is twofold: decentralization of decisionmaking and the quality of the superintendent. The book provides an in-depth look at districts that have in one way or another followed the advice given in one of Ouchi's previous books, about the benefits of weighted student funding, whereby schools receive funds based on the make-up of their student populations, and decentralized decisionmaking. This book includes additional observations of schools where the principles of fiscal decentralization are evident.

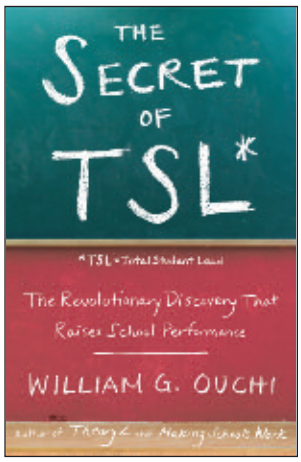
What is good and interesting about *The Secret of TSL*? Ouchi traces the evolution of district policies under several high-profile leaders—Joel Klein (New York), Arne Duncan (Chicago), Arlene Ackerman (San Francisco), Rod Paige (Houston), Randy Ward (Oakland), Pat Harvey (St. Paul)—whose stories are both compelling and informative. The perspective is that of a management professor, one trained in understanding decisionmaking styles and models and the interactions of institutions and individuals. This approach is one not commonly taken by education researchers, who more often focus on what is happening in classrooms and the interactions between students and teachers. Here, an experienced observer looks at the overall structure of how education is produced. The higher-altitude view is both useful and intriguing.

The key element of a school's organization is the number of students that a teacher regularly sees (TSL).

The story line that emerges, perhaps unintentionally, is that the individual leaders have very different views about how to organize and run schools. No one would accuse Randy Ward of having the same style as Arlene Ackerman, even though they were for a time separated only by the Bay Bridge. Indeed, almost as an aside to the title page, the districts that are described in detail follow very different policies that lead to wholly different TSL measures.

What does not work in the book? Well, start at the beginning. There is no sense in terming TSL a "revolutionary discovery." While TSL is calculated in each of the case studies, there is no evidence that the measure is correlated with overall district performance or district growth in achievement. In fact, the "revolutionary discovery" looks more like a required element of a standard management book aimed at the *New York Times* best-seller list. In the tradition of that genre, there are two numbered lists: the "five pillars" of school empowerment and the "four freedoms." These lists largely drop out of the sky except that some of the included items appeared in Ouchi's earlier "revolutionary" book, *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need*. In actuality, the lists are not bad: choice, school empowerment, effective principals, accountability, and weighted student funding matched with control over budget, staffing, curriculum, and scheduling. But there is little explanation about how these notions are implemented, what impact might be expected, and what the trade-offs among the elements might be. In the separate case studies, the leaders sometimes pay attention to the elements on these lists, and sometimes do not, and it is hard to see that those who heed the lists do better than those who do not.

In the end, it is difficult to tell whether the story is about some gifted leaders or about decentralized authority and specific programs. At this point, the case study methodology breaks down, because it is impossible to separate structure and institutions from personality.



But, returning to TSL, the argument is compelling in an intuitive sense. How can one expect a teacher to really get to know 150 different students during a year? How can a teacher possibly assign regular and demanding homework to such large numbers if it is necessary to review and grade all the assignments?

There are, however, some crucial issues of interpretation that beg for serious empirical analysis. For example, the discussion leaves out whether TSL is expected to have an impact while all other things are held constant, such as budget, teacher expertise, curriculum, and support services, to name a few. Or, does it enhance achievement to trade some of these attributes for a smaller TSL? It would be particularly valuable to marry these organizational views with separate analyses of teacher effectiveness. Current discussions of the importance of teacher quality for achievement generally ignore such environmental features as district management and decisionmaking. Could it be that some of the observed variation in teacher quality really reflects unmeasured differences in the organizational features that Ouchi highlights in his case studies? These are testable propositions, and ones that could provide important insights into where the revolution in student achievement is most likely to occur.

Eric Hanushek is senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University and a member of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education.

Dedicated, Decorated, and Disappointing

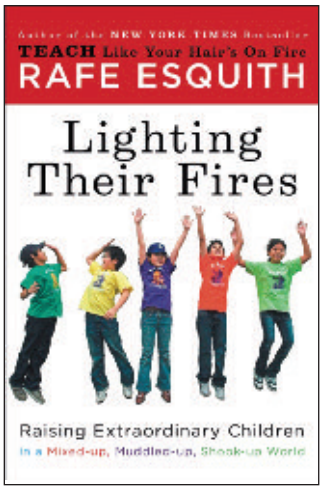
Rafe Esquith's latest is a manual for parents, not policymakers

Lighting Their Fires: Raising Extraordinary Children in a Mixed-up, Muddled-up, Shook-up World

By Rafe Esquith

Viking Adult, 2009, $24.95; 208 pages.

As reviewed by Liam Julian



It's likely that Rafe Esquith is the nation's best-known teacher. He has pocketed an impressive number of awards and honors, including, even, membership in the vaunted Order of the British Empire, a nifty designation he picked up by way of directing the Hobart Shakespeareans—a troupe of young actors plucked from his 5th-grade class at Los Angeles's Hobart Elementary School—who travel the world performing the Bard's works. Esquith has also appeared on Oprah and been praised by the Dalai Lama.

And he has written widely—op-eds, articles, and books. Esquith's first volume on education, *There Are No Shortcuts* (2003), is somewhat self-explanatory; his second, *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire* (2007), is less so. The eccentric title refers to an incident when Esquith, deeply enmeshed in a science lesson, did not realize, until his students began screaming, that he had set his hair alight with an alcohol burner. A cooler-headed Esquith later explained the book's theme on National Public Radio: "If I could care so much I didn't even know my hair was on fire, I was moving in the right direction as a teacher—when I realized that you have to ignore all the crap, and the children are the only thing that matter."

Perhaps because *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire* ended up a *New York Times* best seller, Esquith has stuck with the ignescent symbolism for his latest book, *Lighting Their Fires*. It's a guide of sorts, the main point of which is that good children are made and not born. The author recounts a trip he took with five students to watch a baseball game at Dodger Stadium. They arrived early to take a tour, after which their guide breathlessly confided to Esquith that the pupils were "so confident but so sweet," and "so beautiful" that they "glow." Then "she paused, searching for the right adjective. 'They're extraordinary,' she said in almost whispered respect."

Esquith counters, "But here's the secret. These students weren't born extraordinary—they *became* that way." And *Lighting Their Fires* tells us how they did it.

They did it, unsurprisingly, by being taught by one of the country's most dedicated and obsessive teachers, a man who believes that low-income 5th graders for most of whom English is a second language can learn to love Shakespeare. He also believes that hard work, far more than talent or innate propensities, produces success. Before taking the kids to see the Dodgers, Esquith taught them to score games while they all watched the World Series on television, encouraged them to play baseball daily on the playground, and required them to view Ken Burns's 18½-hour-long documentary, *Baseball*, over spring break. When they attended a major-league game, they would enjoy it because they *worked* at enjoying it.

But there's a difference between being a great teacher and a great author, and the examples and lessons put forth in *Lighting Their Fires* are soggy tinder when it comes to lighting a reader's interest. Esquith trots out a lot of commonsense stuff. That children should learn the importance of being on time, or that they shouldn't spend hours immobilized by television or computers, aren't observations that will have any reasonable person shouting eureka. Policy hounds won't find anything of substance in the book, either, and are bound to be disappointed.

Most readers of *Lighting Their Fires* will be disappointed, in fact. Allegedly an explanation of how to form "thoughtful and honorable people," the book is really part self-help manual for parents and, notwithstanding its preaching about the virtue of humility, part self-aggrandizing memoir. Hobart Shakespearean that he is, Esquith skillfully plays the role of the modest, righteous, self-fulfilled, patient, and wise educator who—though surely he could work in other more-prestigious and remunerative professions—nobly remains in the classroom, quietly going about his saintly business. This is not exaggeration. Examples of Esquith's self-absorbed, self-imposed martyrdom

are ubiquitous. Consider the book's first sentences:

> It was 5:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon in May at Hobart Elementary School in Los Angeles, and most of the dedicated teachers and administrators had long since left campus. I wished I could have escaped with them. I was exceedingly tired. It had been a particularly long week.
>
> In fact, it had been a long year.

Nice touch, adding that bit about "dedicated teachers and administrators"; they're committed, of course, just not *that* committed. A similarly sly autolatrous tactic, plentifully deployed, is Esquith's portrayal of just about everyone he meets as well meaning but misguided, whether it's the Dodger Stadium tour guide who mistakenly believes that his angelic preteen coterie is "extraordinary," or the TSA employee who can't comprehend that his wholesome pupils would choose not to tote Game Boys onto an airplane, or the flight attendant who can't grasp that his cherubic students won't need DVD players for their traveling duration—that, as Esquith tells her, "they're going to read." (The kids are going to...*read*? Someone canonize this man!)

I could go on—for instance, Earnest Esquith gets himself cursed out at the baseball game by two different spectators whose obnoxious manner he publicly corrects, and he somehow validates his own actions by quoting the injunction of Anne Frank's father to confront evil in the world—but to do so would be like electrocuting fish in a barrel. Suffice it to say that Esquith has, in *Lighting Their Fires*, ostensibly written a book for adults. He shouldn't speak to them as if they were children.

Liam Julian is a Hoover Institution research fellow and managing editor of Policy Review.