

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Bennett, P. (2009). *The Grammar School: Striving for Excellence for 50 Years in a Public School World*. Halifax: Formac Publishing Company.

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The author, who was Halifax Grammar School's principal when writing, reviews the school's history. The small, Nova Scotian private school is portrayed as valiantly "challenging the public school system" (p. 11) through its "high standards" and "academic excellence" and to have "exerted an influence in education out of proportion to its size" (p. 4). The book begins by describing the school's foundation in the 1950s during reaction to Progressivism fuelled by Neatby's critique, *So Little for the Mind*. In a wealthy South Halifax neighbourhood, a young mother was unable to enrol her young sons in the local public school due to over-crowding and did not want to send them to a smaller provincial school. Like many parents, this mother wanted the best for her children and was influenced by negative media publicity about schools. The mother connected with Dr. Kaplan, a Physiology professor at Dalhousie, and they banded together other like-minded parents to hastily establish their own school. Within a few months, a school building (a house) was bought, discarded public school furniture was acquired, and a principal and teachers were hired.

Subsequent chapters describe the school's principals and their influence on the school's development, as well as how they were affected by parents and general social and educational changes. The first Scottish head modelled the school after traditional British schools by focusing on memorization and pushing students to excel through measures including corporal punishment. Parents eventually revolted against his harsh methods and pushed him to resign. He left together with a number of teachers and students to establish a rival private school in Dartmouth, across the harbour from Halifax. Tensions between varied parental conceptions of education and the principal's policies and philosophy of education continued. During the 1960s, the school maintained a traditionalist stand to Progressivist influences in public schools, until the early 1970s when a more Progressivist-minded principal began reforms. Again, parents reacted negatively and the principal was replaced by a more traditionalist-minded principal. In the 1980s, more drama between parents and the principal and teachers erupted over Whole Language teaching. This time a long-time, popular teacher was forced to quit, dividing staff, and another principal quit. The next principal "benefited" from negative public media about public schools during the 1990s and worked to finance a large capital campaign that led to the buying and re-furbishing of an old public school at a cost of over \$2 million. The school also worked to establish its uniqueness as an IB school. In the final chapter, the author eulogizes the students' successes and dramatizes the school as a direct challenge to public schools through its continuation, but one that is under threat from public school "pretenders" who have constructed a new, large, facility-rich high school with its own IB program.

The book's strengths are its ability to make the private life of a fancy private school public. The author dramatically describes the internal tensions between parents (generally professionals with varied conceptions of the purposes of schooling but without educational backgrounds) and the school's administrators and teachers. Parental reaction to the policies of the principal were, at times, dramatic and resulted in frequent turnovers of the school's head through resignations or forced resignations. These tensions are described as affecting teacher morale and leading to student attrition. The author also presents an insider view of the many challenges faced by private schools who might "market" themselves differently: over the school's 50 year history, the author refers to the tribulations of maintaining the school afloat, the lack of facilities, the limited nature of extracurricular and enriched course offerings, student attrition at senior grades, teacher and principal insecurity, "chronic infighting over curricula" (p. 64), and student pressure to work hard.

In addition, the book opens up the public versus private school debate. The author asserts that the school has been a challenge to public schools and that its students have done well, often out-performing those in public schools. This conception is often held by parents who are increasingly sending their children to private schools. This is exacerbated by negative media reporting, such as the new *Waiting for Superman* documentary. As a result, private school enrolment, in BC for example, has grown yearly while public schools are seeing declining enrolment that has led to budget problems and school closures. One study found that, "independent school enrolment in the five school districts grew by a whopping 19 per cent on average over the last decade" and that "growth in private schools came at the expense of the public system" (McMartin, 2010).

Whether private schools are better than public schools is debatable. This book illustrates that private, parent-"owned" schools are subject to significant internal tensions and dissent that affect school culture, and that they may lack "enriched" offerings. Further, the claim that students do better than public school students is questionable. Research has shown a clear connection between students' socio-economic status (SES) and school success (Apple, 2006; Feinstein, 2006). In BC, for instance, a private school in a wealthy neighbourhood had a "pass or better" rate of 95% on the 2008/9 English 12 provincial exam. The school had no First Nations or ESL students. A public school in the same neighbourhood had a pass rate of 92% with First Nations, ESL, and special needs students. A poorer school with primarily First Nations students had a pass rate of 56% (Ministry of Education). Further, scholars like Esping-Anderson (2006) have illustrated the importance of family background to school success; students with supportive parents (such as those who are paying for schooling) tend to do better in school. Thus, students' accomplishments aren't necessarily correlated with a particular school: the students described in the book would most likely have excelled in public schools too.

The book illustrates the complexities of education; how varying philosophies of education play out in school settings and the question of whether schools are public or private goods – are schools primarily for students to build their individual skills and abilities, or are schools (as Dewey understood), "a unifying force of common ownership, common interests and common good" (Kerr, 2001 quoted in Reid, 2002, p. 578).

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