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Grubb, W. Norton. (2011) *Leadership Challenges in High Schools: Multiple Pathways to Success*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

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The high school experience varies for us all. “Some individuals remember that “those were the best years of my life”, as Bruce Springsteen sang in “The Summer of ’69”, when they grew toward adulthood and tried all kinds of new activities and personalities” (p. 2). Others struggled through school recalling teachers “like the history teacher in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, droning on endlessly while students fall asleep (p. 3). These “schizophrenic views about high school”, as Grubb calls them, painted so clearly above with pop-culture examples, is one of the many challenges that is discussed in the book *Leadership challenges in high schools: Multiple pathways to success* (2011). Other dilemmas discussed in this book include the high school structure, the high school curriculum, the state of high school leadership, and the growing pressure for school reform.

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Drawing almost 200 years of American high school history, “starting in 1821 with Boston English Classical School” (p. 15) to the modern day high school illuminated through commission reports, empirical research and the voices of 43 school administrators and 5 district officials who were interviewed, this book is a significant contribution to the field for a variety of reasons.

First, this book is a contribution to the field as there is very little written about high schools. High schools are conceptualized differently than middle and elementary schools - they are larger, have more complex course offerings and are more heterogeneous than middle or elementary schools. With the many differences that exist between elementary, middle and secondary schools, there is a need for high schools to be discussed separately. This topic is rarely undertaken by researchers.

Second, this book tackles realistic issues and offers solutions to the everyday high school leader, especially a leader who is implementing multiple pathways. For example, the school size, professional development, keeping a central school vision, and the bureaucratic problems that arise with new programs, such as course codes and costs of unconventional high school programs, are only a few of the leadership issues that this book discusses. Here too, there is little written on these important topics, even though we all know the importance of school leadership.

Finally, this text is a contribution to the field because it helps readers understand how schools are changing - or are rather not changing - and how different conceptions of high school need to be advocated. More specifically, this text offers a two-pronged solution to many dilemmas of high school: multiple pathways and improved high school leadership. Multiple pathways are otherwise known as the creation of theme-based trajectories through high school which is seen as a way to engage secondary students, provide them with the knowledge and skills for a future career of their liking, and the motivation to enroll in post-secondary studies. While there are many different approaches to reforming high schools, this text advocates multiple pathways “because they seem among the most promising, particularly since they address more of the historical dilemmas facing high schools, and more of the current criticisms, than any other approach” (p. 187).

Effectively preparing leaders for the every-day demands that come with re-imagining high school is also advocated as a solution to the ongoing dilemmas of high school. In particular, preparing and supporting leaders for this position, through training and district support, is perceived as necessary.

This book, with such timely topics, especially in an era of school reform both nationally and internationally, is very worthwhile. However, it also has a few shortcomings. For example, at a national level, this book is relevant within the American context, especially to the practicing and aspiring American school leaders. However, at the international level, an area where this book also has much to offer, there unfortunately is silence. This is unfortunate because the topics discussed in this book have far more applicability than the rather narrow American context. For example, this book only focuses on the history of the American high school and its corresponding dilemmas, such as student disengagement and an irrelevant curriculum. Yet, this history and its corresponding dilemmas are quite applicable to many countries throughout the world. Likewise, solutions that are offered in this book have also been similarly fashioned in many countries, such as Canada, England, Finland, Japan, Korea and New Zealand. These countries are all presently offering greater opportunities for individualized learning in order to meet the need, talent and aspirations of each student, whether it be academic, vocational, or workplace learning. England, Finland, Korea and New Zealand, for example, offer different diplomas or certification at the high school level that incorporate academic, vocational or combined learning. Ontario, Canada has also incorporated a variation of pathways, called the Specialist High Skills Major, which is very similar to the program outlined in this book. Simply acknowledging similar international problems and approaches would have increased the scope and relevancy of the book beyond the borders of the US. In other words, referencing different countries in the introductory chapters of book by acknowledging their similar dilemmas and solutions would have complimented this book. It also may have possibly increased the book's readership, without taking away the central focus of multiple pathways and leadership.

Another drawback of this book was its organization. While this book discusses relevant themes of multiple pathways and leadership in high school, these were not as integrated as they could have been. For instance, Chapter 1 describes the history of the American high school, with a focus on its “enduring dilemmas”, such as disengagement and the need for a more relevant high school curriculum. Chapter Two discusses multiple program pathways as a way to solve part of this dilemma. Then Chapters Three, Four and Five discuss high school leadership and how to solve some of the dilemmas that come with implementing multiple pathways. While the book’s organization seems straightforward when outlined above, it did not appear to be in reality. Or rather, the themes in this book seemed somewhat disconnected from each other, instead of the book moving seamlessly between them. For example, while leadership is the primary focus of this book - hence the book’s title - there is little discussion of high school leadership in the first two chapters of the book. Instead of discussing the role of leadership within the enduring dilemmas outlined in Chapter One and within the discussion of pathways in Chapter Two, it is relegated to three separate chapters. This of course is a practical way to organize a book, but it does cause a bit of puzzlement at the end of Chapter Two when it states that the “rest of this book is devoted to the special challenges for leadership in high schools” (p. 41). This puzzlement continued as Chapter Three unfolded into full discussions of leadership, after two chapters that describe two completely different, albeit related, themes. With the discussion of leadership, it began to feel like a separate book. I began to wonder what the focus of this book was indeed about: American high schools, multiple pathways, high school leadership, or high school leadership in multiple pathways. In reality, it was about all of the above; however, I felt that this transition could have been made more seamless if the themes were woven together to a greater degree or at least acknowledged more frequently in order to remind the reader what the book is really trying to accomplish.

Nevertheless, despite the American focus and the book’s organization, both which I felt were accurate, but could have been enhanced to provide more scope and understanding in the reader, this book was very worthwhile. It was written in an accessible way, while remaining research-based. It offers practical solutions to

the ongoing dilemma of student disengagement and the narrow academic curricular focus that does not meet all students' needs. It has identified multiple challenges of high school leaders and discusses how principal preparation programs and district policies could increase high school leadership. This book also discusses the role of school leaders in school change and reform. Finally, in the last chapter of this book, where it summarizes all of the themes listed above, this book also leaves the reader with a realistic perspective of high schools, with touch of hope:

In this dismal situation, with critics continuing to critique the failures of high schools, multiple pathways present an option for a new kind of heterogeneity. They provide student choice, to be sure, but they also constrain that choice by the serious themes pathways adopt. They leave postsecondary education as an option while acknowledging that employment after high school — or the common mixture of employment and further schooling — are also options” (p. 202).

In a time when there are many criticisms of high school with endless short-term solutions for change that create little change, Grubb offers his readers hope. Yes, he paints the scene realistically, outlining the systemic problems within high school and high school leadership. He articulates that change is not easy nor are there solutions for every problem. However, this realistic perspective of high school is not limited to criticism alone. He offers hope. He offers realistic, practical solutions that districts and school leaders can work with. He offers a solution to student disengagement with multiple pathways. It may be too early to tell if this is indeed a long-term solution, but it seems possible. If nothing else, it gives us hope, something needed in midst of the school reform movement.

About the Reviewer

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