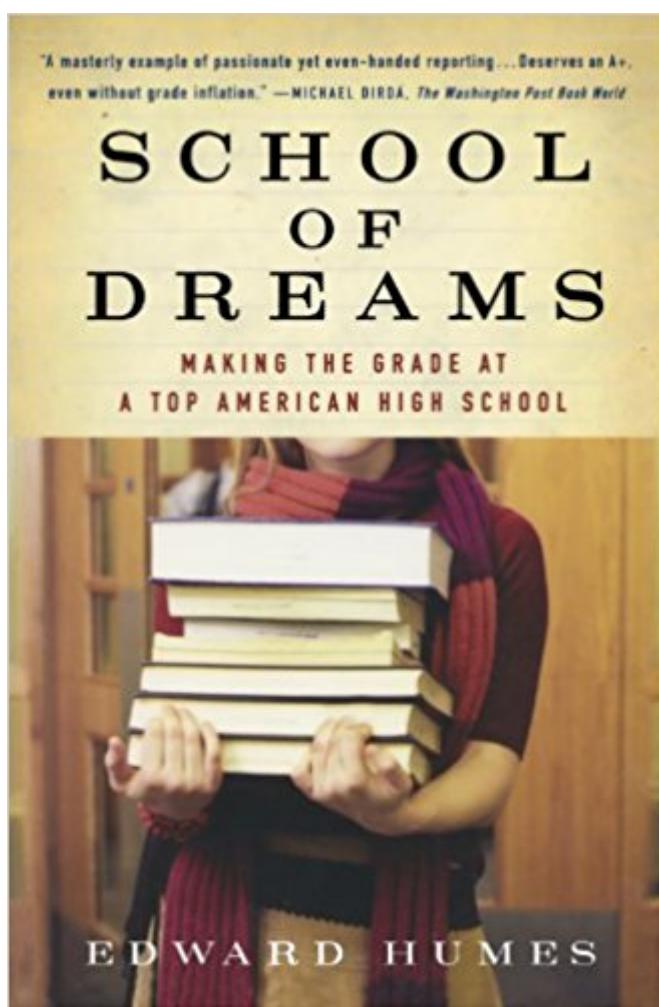


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# School Of Dreams: Making The Grade At A Top American High School



## Synopsis

The pressure to succeed in our nation's most competitive public high schools is often crushing. Striving to understand this insular world, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Edward Humes spent a year at California's Whitney High, a school so renowned that parents move across town-and across the world-hoping to enroll their children. That's because schools like Whitney deliver everything parents want: love of learning, a sense of mission, and SAT scores that pave the way to elite universities. Attending such a school, of course, carries its own toll: High-achieving, pressured kids survive on espresso and four hours' sleep a night, falling into despair if they get a B. Lively, personal, and very readable, *School of Dreams* uncovers what works-and what doesn't-at this model high school, offering parents, students, and teachers some powerful messages about public education today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Journalist Edward Humes shows us a little-seen side of our nation's educational system: the side that works. Humes spent a year (2001-02) at Whitney High School in Cerritos, California, a small, middle-class suburb of Los Angeles, where he taught a writing workshop and observed the daily workings of this top-ranked public school. The book honestly examines the extraordinary effort (and elusive chemistry) it takes to achieve that status and the subsequent toll it takes on the remarkable students at the school. It also provides a wonderful portrait of American life. For all its distinction, Whitney High School reflects a cross-section of America, where immigrant families struggle with

their American counterparts to guide their children toward academic excellence. It comes as no surprise that at the heart of Whitney's success is a devoted staff of teachers and administrators who are as overworked and brilliant as their high-achieving charges. Nor should it shock us that the school's ranking does not come without a price. Whitney students are driven and well-rounded, but they are also sleep-deprived and often subjected to extreme parental pressure. The downside of life at Whitney is that a focus on high grades and college placement sometimes takes the place of the joy of learning, and worse yet, sometimes leads some students to cheat. Still, as Humes's engaging narrative reveals, the triumphs far outweigh the inevitable shortcomings. Unfortunately, the model Whitney provides is easy to identify but not easy to reproduce. As Humes observes, our nation's most successful schools "are small, intimate, and attentive. . . marked by high expectations put to work in tangible ways. . . [with] rigorous traditional studies (as opposed to rigorous drilling for annual high-stakes tests); longer hours of study and work; strong parental involvement. . . low absenteeism and few discipline problems; and leadership with a vision." --Silvana Tropea --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Humes (Mississippi Mud, etc.) spent 2001 at top-ranked Whitney High School in Cerritos, Calif. While helping seniors with their college application essays, he was also trying to understand this public school's astounding success. Not only do its students, year after year, proceed to America's top colleges, but increasingly, families move to Cerritos-from all over the world-so their children can attend Whitney. The school is selective; an entrance test is required. But academic "cherry-picking" is only part of the story. Once at Whitney, students surpass similarly skilled students elsewhere-and not because of computers, standardized curriculum, "no child left behind" programs or high-stakes testing. Rather, Humes finds, it's an old-fashioned combination of high expectations and committed educators. They expect students to put in long hours, even "all-nighters." Discipline problems and drug use are unusual and taken seriously when they do occur. All Whitney's teachers are encouraged to educate for something more lasting and meaningful than the AP exams. Elsewhere in America, Humes learns, there's a "bias against the intellectually gifted," but at Whitney, students are expected to work hard, learn a lot and achieve. While Humes notes a few downsides to this culture of high expectations-stress, caffeine addiction and cheating problems-they seem fairly manageable at Whitney. As America's policy makers obsess over minimum proficiency standards, Humes, in his well-written, informative study, presents the Whitney model as a needed corrective, urging parents and policy makers to study success for a change. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or

unavailable edition of this title.

As a typical concerning parent, how will the kids succeed in classroom and ultimately in the real world are always being debated. There's no right or wrong answer, nor one path that fits all kids. This book, regardless of the attacks by the alums of Whitney High for its details and angles, is a good read for parents who want to know (or get confirmation) that how much pressure it can get for a competitive high school student preparing for college. My only question after reading the book: is it worth trading this crazy life style for lost childhood? That depends on the kid him/herself. Smart kids who hit the books will do really well in above average high schools regardless. There are plenty of examples of college grads from elite schools can't get a job, and high school drop outs make millions. It's not worth the grinding to shave a year off college (and lose that extra college life experience), and definitely wrong for parents pushing kids for the sake of his and her ego. But if my kids like that environment and can pass the test, I have no problem sending them to the school.

I can't vouch for the accuracy of this book, but it was certainly an eye-opener. The only drawback was how angry I got that a quality education like the one Whitney offered was available to so few. Hume does a great job of sketching about half a dozen students in depth, and others in slightly less depth. There are stressed students, laid back students, supremely organized students, students in serious trouble, and many who fall in between. We learn of the sacrifices required to keep up in classes; many of these teenagers are carrying a workload that would make a regular working adult blanch. We also meet several memorable teachers, one of whom boldly decides to try working without a net. He allows his students to develop an experiment on their own for the entire semester, then test it before judges. The results are somewhat unexpected. Another section deals with Neil Bush's (George W's brother) visit to the school, and his failure to get the students enthusiastic about his new program. Reading this book, it is hard to tell if the students or parents put the most pressure on the kids, but clearly it's a certain personality style that flourishes at Whitney. The students' informing Bush that subjects should be rigorously pursued to his bafflement is priceless. The only problem came when the author swerved away from describing the students and teachers at the school, and began giving background on how Whitney came to be. That was the weakest section. Luckily, the focus switched back to the students. While it is true that many seemed somewhat stressed, so too are students at less rigorous schools, and when it crosses the line should be decided on a case by case basis. Are teens really happier with a flourishing social life and less academic rigor? I think it depends on the teen.

This terrific book about a high performing public high school in California is one you won't be able to put down. It reads like a novel, with nuggets of wisdom and insightful observations on what truly goes into achieving an exceptional public high school. This is not an uncritical look. The pushy parents and students who would rather cheat than risk a grade below "A" are rampant. But the message of success is clear -- excellent teachers, a supportive environment where all students are known, high expectations planted before puberty kicks in, and focus on an indepth, academmmically challenging curriculum, rather than test scores, is the ticket. Most refreshing is the total absence of educational & bureaucratic jargon. School of Dreams is a must-read for anyone who cares about what is going on in public education today. Kudos to Edward Humes for this breakthrough book.

Good

I went to WHS roughly 15 years ago. While there are clearly many changes to the campus since I was there, many other things remain the same today: the faculty, students, and parents invest a lot into the students' successes; and the high expectation brings out many good and some bad consequences.Hume weaves together stories that follow selected Whitney faculty and students. The book focuses on the more interesting aspect of the Whitney experience by condensing away the quiet mundance daily routines. While this has the effect of making the stories more dramatic than in real life, the description of the highs, lows, and the quirky moments captures the essence that underly the lives of the people that make up this 1100-student school. At times, Hume ties the Whitney story with more general commentary on the state of the education system. Still, the book should be read more as documentary stories than as a study into what consitutes a good academic system.

Edward Humes did an incredible job reporting on the daily lives of students at Whitney High. He captured the challenges met by the students whose parents expect only the very best of their children in this high achieving school.

It was a special opportunity to read a book about something so close to my heart. It's been more than a decade since I wandered sleepily through the halls of Whitney High School, but through Hume's honest portrayal it's as though I never left. Memories of feeling "never good enough" came hurtling back only to be replaced with the gratifying realization that like me, the kids in the book will

soon find it's what they learn in the proverbial classroom of life that truly matters. Whitney gets you to college, you get you through life. I urge parents who view Whitney as the Holy Grail to read this book carefully and then read everything in quotation marks again. These are the voices of your children. These were the words in my head that never found a voice...until now.

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