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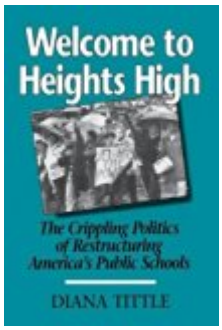
Diana Tittle. *Welcome to Heights High: The Crippling Politics of Restructuring America's Public Schools.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1995. xviii + 345 pp. $22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8142-0683-6.



Reviewed by William R. Everdell

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Founded in 1906, Heights High School in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, became one of America's great public schools in its first half-century. Now it has the look of a heap of ashes where here and there the scattered embers glow. It's happened before to American high schools, but never, so far as I know, with a historian watching in the wings. Diana Tittle, who describes herself as a "freelance journalist," demonstrates in this book that she has the historian's touch. Though she doesn't always have the depth of field typical of historians, she has a historian's feel for how myths are made and broken, a historian's faith that some stories can be true, and a historian's devotion to the ultimate value of documents and first-hand evidence. Signing on to report on a grant-financed Model School reform project in 1988, she hung around University Heights High for the whole time it took for the project to be born, raise hopes, and die. For a good part of five years she talked with folks in the school building, read endless reports, took notes at endless meetings, and interviewed everyone who counted in the Cleveland Heights-University Heights school district.

She seems to have done her best to listen to each constituency and to record every position without authorial shading, aiming in her narrative at the good old Olympian stance of objective journalism, as if post-Modernism and perspective were a barely heard rumor. In an "Afterword," she finally breaks down and presents us with a succinct list of fourteen institutionalized practices and attitudes that insured that nothing very important would change at the school, and a single phrase for what happened in the 1980s at Heights High, "the politics of inertia." ***The Politics of Inertia*** would probably have been the title of Tittle's book had it been entered in the discipline of political science, but in her resolute attention to the particular case of Heights High and the personalities of those who moved it and shook it, readers will not see political science.

Useful though this book is as a case study of the general type of large suburban public high schools, it is, first and foremost, the story of one school in one district at a particular time--a history. True, many of the characters and constituencies are so well known that they might have

stepped out of the ***commedia dell'arte*** of U.S. public education: the cynical union chief steward, the 1960s people in the Humanities departments, the careerist "educators" who come from distant states to run things according to the increasingly idiotic research that comes from "schools of education." Who has not run into the district superintendent who listens most carefully to the loudest parent caucus; the school board, split down the middle between those who are educated enough to know what a good education is and those who aren't; or the principal who came from another state, was "a miserable student" all the way through high school, and didn't learn anything until someone reached him in college? Don't you know a science teacher who works harder than the horse in ***Animal Farm*** but can't see much beyond the provisions of the union contract? Haven't you met the causenik who suddenly emerges in the Math department, the polite but seething teacher in the "non-academic" track, the history teacher who takes the leap of faith into administration, after years spent trying to defend his subject on a forever shrinking turf, because he hopes that the new principal will stay long enough to back his long-dreamt reforms? The reform that will, of course, improve everybody else's class but not his own because he cannot teach it any more.

And, of course, there is the "main issue," as the media make it, the issue of race, the same one around which J. Anthony Lukas built his great book about Boston, ***Common Ground***. The race "issue" is, of course, insoluble--insoluble not just because it is based on a biological fantasy, but because it really isn't the issue. The real issue is individual fantasies of wealth, suburban property, and schools as vehicles for social mobility instead of tools for social stasis. A school of a thousand or so in a community with some generational stability, a school, in other words, like the Heights High School of 1930, would hardly be aware of the debate. It would, like nearly all small schools, be unhelpfully homogeneous in color, and, probably, creed as well. On the other hand it probably would not harbor youth gangs who shoot at each other or students who have given up the hope of getting an education because no one can show them what an education looks like.

The Model School Project that is the central theme of this book was cooked up by a man in the District Office in order to get a little foundation money for the schools. The new superintendent, who had halted the repainting of Heights High when the district budget ran dry, liked the project and passed it on to the new principal. The principal liked the idea of curricular and scheduling reform; but he believed in fostering faculty initiative by avoiding their meetings, and thought the best use of his time was in reestablishing the school's safety and discipline. The teacher to whom he delegated the project, a moonlighter at the local college, was supposed to form study committees meeting after school where faculty members would work out and write down what they would like in the way of new ways of doing things--something the Schools of Education had been calling "site-based management."

Most teachers will know more or less what happened next, especially if they teach five classes a day with thirty or so students in a class. Nothing much. The study committee on building maintenance simply disbanded, after discovering that almost every maintenance recommendation made in the last two accreditation reviews had yet to be acted on. One teacher was inspired to try to repaint her own classroom and thereby made permanent enemies in the maintenance staff union. Months later, the principal's new deputy, the ex-history teacher, pulled together four other really good teachers into a single Project team. They began to read Ted Sizer[1] and plan a whole new school--one that would have a single curriculum with fewer ability tracks and fewer electives and extracurriculars. As a result of this and the grouping of students into interdepartmental teaching teams, there would be smaller classes

and fewer students per teacher. Students would get more attention, multiple-choice tests would be replaced by writing and reading, teachers would have more professional time outside their classrooms. Last, but far from least, there would be far less de facto intramural segregation by color.

You might know this dream. If you teach in one of the new mini-schools or in a private school you may call it reality. It is easy to see why it did not work at Heights High. No member of the Project Team was black, none of them was a union steward, and none of them was a current school parent. The team itself was reinventing the school, but few others in the school knew much about it or cared, and most of those few had built-in reasons to oppose it. As the second year of the Project ended, the team began to organize "retreats." Foundation money would pay for up to a score of teachers at a time to go to a hotel and eat, sleep, and talk far from the passing bells. The first one, in 1989, was for themselves and it was during these three days in February that Heights High teachers, probably for the first time in the school's history, began to actively dream of not just a better class for themselves but a better school for everybody. No school board would ever finance such a thing as a retreat for teachers, though any private corporation could have told them it was worth it, and indeed, the first one was so successful in raising consciousness that the team made plans to run retreat after retreat for other colleagues until the whole enormous faculty was aboard. Surely their underpaid, overworked and underperked teachers would go for this "unprecedented largesse."

They did, when they could find the time over the next year and a half. Despite opposition from union stewards, minorities, and other teachers trying to defend what little they had managed to wrest from the old system, enough of them adopted the Project as their own that one can feel the disappointment when the newly elected superintendent, chosen by the newly elected board, chose a replacement for the resigning Heights High principal in the face of crowds screaming racism at each other, and the Project died.

The grant ran out in 1993. Tittle had her book out by 1995: a good book, but a sad one.

Note [1] Theodore Sizer, ***Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School*** (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) and ***Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*** (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

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