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Seven Myths About Diverse Schools

By Jay Mathews
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Diverse is an elastic word, but no matter how you stretch it, my high school was not diverse.

Hillsdale High in pleasantly suburban San Mateo, Calif., had about 1,600 students in 1963, the year I graduated. A basement flood recently wiped out my yearbooks, so I cannot make an exact count, but I don't think there were more than two or three African Americans and a dozen Asian Americans in the entire school. I suspect there were a few Hispanics, but I don't remember any.

Hillsdale is very different now, as are the schools my children have attended, which I think is good, but we still have a major problem with this odd concept of diversity. Diverse can mean a nice blend of all ethnicities, but can also mean lots of low-income black and Hispanic children, and to many people who have not thought about this very deeply, that is a bad thing.

They are wrong, and their failure to understand what is actually happening in many heavily minority schools is aggravating both our racial problems and our education problems. To bring light to this issue, I am adding a new selection to my Better Late Than Never Book Club, which spotlights splendid works that I have overlooked because of my habitual sloth and stupidity.

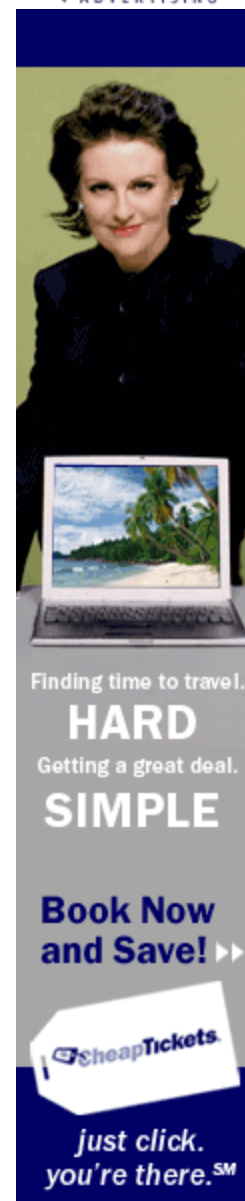
The book is a modest 163 pages. You can read it in a couple of hours. The title is "Debunking the Middle-Class Myth: Why Diverse Schools Are Good For All Kids," published in 2003 by The Scarecrow Education Press. The online book stores list it for about \$23.50, although you can get some copies for under \$14 on amazon.com.


The author, Eileen Gale Kugler, is a communications specialist who knows exactly how to get to the point. More importantly, she is the parent of two children who attended Annandale High School in Fairfax County, one of the most successful diverse schools in the country. Annandale's student body is 37 percent non-Hispanic white, 25 percent Hispanic, 21 percent Asian and 15 percent Black. Thirty four percent of the students are poor enough to qualify for federally subsidized lunches.

The first sentence of Kugler's book is: "I am a middle-class white woman." She knows all about the misinformation that rules in neighborhoods where people such as she and I tend to live. Kugler's Northern Virginia neighborhood experienced a typical demographic switch in the 1980s and 1990s when more low-income minorities, including many children from foreign countries, suddenly appeared in the local public schools.

"As often happens when minority populations increase, some homeowners left the neighborhood for 'whiter' pastures," she said. "Negative stereotypes about the recent immigrants were whispered over backyard fences and around the neighborhood pools. Older residents decried the changes to their school,

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which no longer looked like it did when their children attended."

Kugler knew that great teaching was still going on at Annandale High, and her children were thriving -- not in spite of, but *because of* the diversity. "Learning comes alive," Kugler said, "when wisdom is shared not only by competent teachers and textbooks, but also by fellow students with life experiences and cultures that illuminate whole new worlds."

She began to organize a series of meetings for parents to get to the root of the distorted image that was being passed from neighbor to neighbor. "Whenever I heard something negative about the school," she said, "I began asking where they heard it. I was shocked at what I found. In virtually every case, the negative comments originated with people who had nothing to do with the school. The negative comments were coming from people whose children graduated from the school decades earlier when it was all white or from parents of children in predominantly white schools. They were simply spreading the prevailing myths. On the other hand, people who got their information from someone who had firsthand knowledge of Annandale High, be it students, teachers, or parents, heard a completely different message."

In her book, Kugler identifies seven myths that keep otherwise smart parents away from such schools. I have only enough space to hint at the detailed way she dismantles each misimpression:

Myth 1: "The best school for my child is the one with the highest standardized test scores."

A recent Washington Post survey of Montgomery County, virtually a twin of Fairfax County in size and demographics, found that children from middle-class backgrounds consistently scored very high on reading and math tests, even if they went to schools with a high concentration of low-income students. Annandale High's average SAT score is lower than that of schools in homogeneous middle-class communities, but that is just an average. Large numbers of Annandale students score very high and are accepted at Yale, Columbia, Duke, Northwestern, Johns Hopkins, William & Mary, the University of Virginia and many other schools on the U.S. News & World Report list.

Myth 2: "One style of school leadership will work in every school."

Kugler praises the atmosphere created by Susan Akroyd, principal of Parklawn Elementary School in Fairfax County, who has a bus pick up parents at their apartment complexes for important meetings and even rents an apartment to be used as a Parklawn Family Center where mothers and fathers can take parenting and English classes. During Ramadan when Muslims fast, Annandale High offers Muslim students a classroom where they can study during lunch and don't have to enter the cafeteria. She quotes one student telling a mother who complained about a basketball teammate's subpar performance, "Come on, Mom. Don't you know it's Ramadan and she's been fasting all day?"

Myth 3: "The best teachers prefer homogeneous middle-class schools."

Tom Pratuch, a national board certified chemistry teacher, sought out a job at Annandale High precisely because of the range of backgrounds of its students. He thinks many top-flight teachers share his taste in schools. "Most teachers are trained to reach a uniform population and that's what they are comfortable with. So, many good teachers seek out homogeneous schools," he said. But the best teachers, skilled at teaching different students in different ways, yearn for variety. "Just look at who is winning the national awards and major grants," he said. "They are predominantly from diverse schools."

Myth 4: "Diverse schools can't provide rigorous classes."

This is an especially irksome canard to me, and easy to discredit. Every year in the Washington area I measure the degree of participation in college-level courses of high schools in the Washington area, and do the same thing in Newsweek every three years or so, looking at high schools nationally. Annandale has an International Baccalaureate program that provides the most demanding academic experience available in America at that grade level. Its college level course participation rate ranks in the top 3 percent of all U.S. public schools, and there are other schools just as diverse that are doing just as well.

Myth 5: "Diverse schools are not safe."

Kugler argues that in many ways they are safer, because educators in such schools are very sensitive to the problems of adolescents from different cultures and much better at dealing with them. There are studies showing that drug- and alcohol-abuse is much higher among non-Hispanic white than minority students, and white males are more likely to bring weapons to school than black males. I received an e-mail recently from a reader outraged at the murder of a white student who attended another diverse Washington area public high school, T.C. Williams in Alexandria. The reader said this showed how awful such schools were at teaching character and values, and why so many parents put their children in private schools. The reader apparently didn't know that the victim had tried to avoid a fight, but was assaulted anyway by youths at night in front of city hall. All of his attackers were whites who attended private schools.

Myth 6: "Family beliefs and values will be threatened if we expose our youth to people with different perspectives."

Jaime Bacigalupi sent three children to Annandale High after they attended Catholic schools through the eighth grade. She told Kugler she had wanted a more intense religious education when they were younger, but appreciated the quality of the public schools, particularly Annandale, and did not feel their values were ever threatened by Annandale's diversity. "If you only live within the boundaries of your values," she said, "then you have no idea of the strength of those values. If they are never challenged, never questioned, never tested, you don't grow."

Myth 7: "Minority parents don't care about the education of their children."

Anyone who has spent any time at all with minority parents knows that this is nonsense, but sadly the notion is still widely held. Kugler cites a survey by Public Agenda showing that minority parents actually place a great priority on higher education than non-Hispanic white parents.

Kugler, an adviser to school districts, has many suggestions for persuading parents to take a closer look at those neighborhood schools that seem to be full of slow learners, but are actually taking American public education to new levels of achievement. Read the book and then, instead of asking your neighbor what she thinks, go to talk to someone like Kugler who has actually had a child in one of those schools.

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