

## Introduction



Selective public high schools that serve motivated kids and high achievers, many of them also very smart, have been a tiny but important part of the U.S. secondary-education landscape for generations. Some are world famous and boast celebrated alumni/ae. Others may be virtually unknown beyond their immediate communities, but there they often play distinctive and highly valued roles.

Yet nowhere can one learn much about this galaxy within the American secondary-schooling universe. There's no orderly list of these schools, nor any trade association to which they all belong—and that hires lobbyists and publicists to advance their interests. Many have low profiles, perhaps intentionally so. They don't hold great interest for contemporary education reformers, philanthropists, or elected officials, most of whom concentrate on the challenges of *low*-achieving and disadvantaged youngsters. They've also been largely ignored by scholars and analysts. If they appear at all in the media, it's usually because of some diversity- or fairness-related ruckus involving their admissions practices. And practically nobody except those directly involved seems to know what actually goes on inside them.

Our purpose in this book is to explore this obscure yet consequential corner of the public-education cosmos, mindful that these schools intersect in important ways with four urgent policy challenges facing American education.

First, is the United States providing *all* of its young people the education that they need in order to make the most of their capacities, both for their own sake and for that of the larger society?

## Introduction

2

Second, have we neglected to raise the ceiling while we've struggled to lift the floor? As the country strives to toughen its academic standards, close its wide achievement gaps, repair its bad schools, and "leave no child behind," is it also challenging its high-achieving and highly motivated students—and those who may not yet be high achievers but can learn substantially more than the minimum?<sup>1</sup> Are we as determined to build more great schools as to repair those that have collapsed?

Third, is America making wise investments in its own future prosperity and security by ensuring that its high-potential children are well prepared to break new ground and assume leadership roles on multiple fronts?

Finally, at a time when we're creating new school choices and individual learning opportunities of many kinds, as well as the means for many more families to avail themselves of those options, are we paying sufficient attention to *this* kind of choice: the academically selective high school, and the learning opportunities it offers to youngsters with the capacity and inclination to benefit from them?

All are serious, complicated issues that bear on America's future, and we don't promise to settle them here. We do, however, promise to escort readers into a fascinating sector within public education that illustrates the larger challenges while offering at least a partial response to them.

The book is organized into three sections. In part I, we explain how we defined and identified the "academically selective public high schools" that belong on our list (which can be found in appendix I.) We also supply considerable information about the schools as a group and how they compare with public high schools in general.

Part II features profiles of eleven schools that we visited in nine states and the District of Columbia. Each illustrates unique approaches to finding, selecting, and educating eager and talented students beyond the traditional high school environment. Following these profiles, we reflect on trends, patterns, and differences that we observed among them.

In part III, we discuss some of the issues, challenges, and policy choices that these schools pose and offer our own thoughts regarding the role of schools like these in addressing the great challenges of American education.

Appendix I explains our school identification and selection methods in greater detail and names the 165 schools that made it through our filters.

Appendix II reproduces the survey that we sent to principals or senior administrators at all those schools.

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