

A National Treasure: A Political History of University High School

John Hosmer & Paul Karlowicz

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(Review by Tom Jenney)

In its 50-year history, University High School in Tucson has logged at least three major achievements. First, it has built and maintained its status as an elite public college prep school with some of the very highest test scores and largest scholarship awards in the country. Second, it has achieved ethnic integration to the point where it has Hispanic enrollment on par with the demographics of Pima County and has also produced more National Hispanic Scholars than any other school in the country. Third, it has survived and thrived in the face of varying degrees of hostility from the administrations of the Tucson Unified School District and Rincon High School (its host school since 1985). At best, UHS enjoyed brief periods of benign neglect from TUSD and Rincon – if “benign” can include having many of its classes relegated to the worst facilities on the aging Rincon campus, including a leaky and poorly ventilated basement with scarce access to natural light.

Naturally, the book will be of interest to readers in diminished degrees expanding outward from the circles of UHS alumni and teachers, TUSD parents, Tucson residents, and people who follow education policy in Arizona. But I think that the authors were not being overly ambitious in referring to the school as a “national” treasure. For citizens and practitioners seeking to improve America’s public district schools, the book is an extended case study

in how extremely difficult it can be to create and sustain innovative programs in those systems. (As a “magnet” school, UHS focuses on gifted education, but many of the same lessons will apply to efforts to improve outcomes for students at any level of cognitive aptitude.)

The book tends to be a bit repetitive when it comes to reiterating its main theses and reframing the ongoing conflicts. That makes sense, given that the most realistic target readers of the book will be those in the inner circles, and those readers will probably turn first to chapters covering the time periods when they were involved with UHS or TUSD or education policy in Arizona. (I’m a UHS alumnus and have been involved in education reform in Arizona, so I read the book cover-to-cover and mined the endnotes to find Easter eggs.)

In nearly every chapter of the book, you will find stories of dedicated educators struggling mightily against multiple constraints to create and sustain one of the top schools in the country and to simultaneously achieve ethnic integration. They did so in addition to dealing with the normal (and formidable) daily challenges faced by any teacher or administrator. In the process, some of them were overwhelmed by the physical and emotional burdens they took on. Nothing I write in the remainder of this review should be taken to diminish or disparage the amazing efforts of those individuals.

Reading *A National Treasure*, I was frequently reminded of the old saw about Robert E. Lee being a brilliant battlefield tactician but a bad strategist who failed to learn from the example of George Washington’s crucial pivot to

avoiding open battles. At a tactical level, Lee could win every battle (or at least, perform relatively well in them), but as the years of the Civil War dragged on, his increasingly ragged army was chewed up in repeated confrontations in the open field against Union forces, which were fed by the North's larger population and superior industrial productivity.

By analogy, I believe that it has always been a fundamentally flawed strategy to attempt to build and maintain an elite college prep school (or any truly innovative educational program) in the institutional and political space of a traditional American school district such as Tucson Unified. Traditional districts are riddled with bureaucratic imperatives, hamstrung by complex funding models (with multiple strings-attached funding silos), and often dominated by an anti-intellectual politics that the authors rightly identify as a major current in mainstream American culture. In combination, those constraints are the kiss of death for rapid and sustained innovation.

As such, the educators and administrators of UHS have spent five decades struggling to achieve site-based self-governance in the face of centralized bureaucratic mandates and to channel various siloed funds to their best uses. Meanwhile, some of the key goals of the visionaries of UHS's first and second generations have met with repeated failures – most importantly, getting UHS its own campus with a dedicated junior high feeder school to ensure that promising students (especially minority students) are adequately prepared for the tough curriculum at UHS.

For an example of a school system operating free of district constraints, Arizona has the BASIS charter schools, which began operating soon after Governor Fife Symington and the Arizona Legislature enabled charters to operate in 1994. Free of district constraints, and with a very streamlined and flexible funding mechanism, the BASIS schools rocketed to the top of America's rankings of public schools with high test scores. BASIS operates a dedicated K-8 feeder system to make sure that freshmen arrive in high school ready for Advanced Placement coursework. (They also have modern buildings!)

Two of the most pivotal UHS founders, Reginald Barr and C. Diane Bishop, were also prime movers in enabling the creation of charter schools in Arizona. (Barr later went on to found several charter schools.) As the BASIS charter in Tucson began to ascend, Barr warned his former colleagues at UHS about the impending challenges to the school's competitive advantage: "I fear the wolf is at the door." (Barr and Bishop were also supportive of the establishment of open enrollment in Arizona, which brought much-needed state funds to a struggling TUSD: at a time when most schools in TUSD faced declining enrollment, students from outside the district were transferring into UHS.)

From my point of view, the second-generation visionaries and the more entrepreneurial teachers at UHS should have seized the earliest opportunity to leave TUSD and become an independent charter school, governed by the UHS faculty School Council and focused on the explicit twin goals of academic excellence and ethnic integration. (I might have added a third goal:

continuing to be a fun school, which would have differentiated UHS in the market from the intense “grind” ethos at BASIS.) The collective action problems involved in making the jump would only get worse with each passing year. Even if educators share a vision of innovation and high performance, most of them are famously risk-averse outside of their own classrooms – why risk your pension and your advancement in the district hierarchy on a speculative venture?

The only serious bid for UHS to become a charter school was in 1995, but the proposal was for UHS to become a district-chartered school within TUSD, not a truly independent charter. In an internal referendum, the UHS parent and alumni groups voted overwhelmingly to become a charter school. But the faculty and student votes fell narrowly short of the two-thirds supermajority the school had established as a threshold. (Even if the referendum had passed, I strongly suspect that TUSD would not have accepted the proposal: it’s hard to imagine the district’s bureaucratic control freaks allowing even the modicum of independence afforded by a captive district charter.)

On the topic of ethnic integration, I should mention for the benefit of non-Tucsonans that TUSD was under a federal desegregation court order from 1974 to 2025, despite the fact that TUSD had officially desegregated in 1951. The deseg order had some advantages from the point of view of TUSD, including the ability of the TUSD Board to levy secondary property taxes without voter approval. But federal oversight also came with restricted funding silos and the micromanagement of student recruitment – and even

school curricula! – by the federal Office of Civil Rights. The deseg order also became an excuse for endless political machinations within the district, with Board members and district administrators using the notoriously slippery concept of “equity” as a handy weapon in fighting for their pet visions of district policy.

After reading *National Treasure*, I am tempted to describe the heroic labors of UHS educators and administrators over the past five decades as “Sisyphean.” But unlike Sisyphus, UHS really did get some of its boulders to the top of the steep and slippery hill of TUSD politics. My fear is that those boulders are precariously perched and could easily start rolling back down.

Despite the prestige UHS has brought to Tucson, despite the success of its ethnic integration, and despite the amount of state money it has brought into the district, there is no reason to think that the politicians and bureaucrats at TUSD will stop trying to strangle the school – let alone give the school a campus and a junior high. If anything, the very success of UHS could make it a target. The authors of *National Treasure* are correct that anti-intellectualism is a strong current in American political life. But an even stronger current is the self-destructive power of envy.

— Tom Jenney (UHS '88) is a writer based in Phoenix. For Tucsonans: Phoenix is a large city about two hours north of Tucson where, strangely, very few people worship the UofA Wildcats. Jenney posts stuff at LilburneLiterary.com