CASE STUDY 5.1
The World We Created at Hamilton High: A Schoolography

In 1988, Gerald Grant published a fascinating book describing life at Hamilton High School (real school, fictitious name) from the 1950s to the 1980s. Like a biography that helps us understand the forces shaping and directing individual lives, The World We Created at Hamilton High may be thought of as a “schoolography,” offering powerful insights into the forces that have shaped today’s schools. The events at Hamilton probably mirror many of the developments in the life of the school you attended, or the one in which you will be teaching. The biography of Hamilton High offers a microcosm of the roots of and reasons behind the current demand for educational reform.1

A SUPER SCHOOL (IF YOU’RE ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE TRACKS), 1953–1965

In 1953, Hamilton High opened its doors to students growing up in one of the new suburban developments, a prototype of those that were sprouting up all across postwar America. Carefully coiffed girls in sweaters and skirts and neatly dressed boys with crewcuts and baggy khakis relished their new school, with its tennis courts, modern design, and strong academic offerings. The social life of the Northern, all white, middle-class school was driven by fraternities and sororities that prohibited or limited the membership of Catholics and Jews. The principal, a former coach, did not provide instructional leadership but certainly did run a tight ship. The purpose of the school was college preparation, and an evaluation of Hamilton written in 1960 reported that a “strong, almost pathological resistance to taking non-college preparation courses exists in this school community.” While letters in the school paper debated whether school spirit was dwindling and what would happen if girls were allowed to wear miniskirts, the school board was approving a desegregation plan that would bring the “southern problem” to Hamilton and open a second, more volatile chapter of the school’s history.

SOCIAL UNREST COMES TO SCHOOL, 1966–1971

Northern desegregation was as difficult as southern desegregation, with white teachers unprepared to teach black students and both black and white

1Gerald Grant, The World We Created at Hamilton High (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
students encountering the reality of racism. SAT scores fell, racial incidents and conflicts rose, and white families began leaving the neighborhood. The proportion of African American students in the school system jumped from 15 to 33 percent. As racial confrontations grew, Hamilton was forced to close several times because of bomb threats and the cloud of threatened violence. Fear gripped the school, teachers became physically ill trying to survive the tension, and several principals, unable to control or eliminate the problems, came and went during this period. By the fall of 1971, more than 70 percent of the teachers who had taught at Hamilton in 1966 had left the school.

**THE STUDENTS’ TURN, 1972–1979**

The old world of fraternities, sororities, and a social structure that was discriminately clear disintegrated in the race riots of the 1960s and split the faculty: some were sympathetic to the curricular change and goals of the student protests; others opposed such changes. The administration used uneven standards of discipline, with white children penalized less harshly than black children. There was a lack of trust between the old and the young, parents and the school, and even between the students and administration at all levels as protests over the Vietnam War and the draft grew more intense. As America’s social fabric unraveled, the Supreme Court handed down influential decisions awarding greater liberties to students, including grievance procedures and due process rights. Many teachers and administrators were unclear about what constituted legal or illegal discipline. As a result, they found it legally smarter not to discipline students. An abyss was created, with power unclear and the rules in limbo. From this maelstrom, student leaders (with some faculty supporters) emerged, and student demands began to reshape the world at Hamilton. While teachers and the administration tolerated student infractions of the rules (for fear of being drowned in litigation), students suffered no such inhibitions. They flexed their legal muscles by bringing suits against parents, guardians, and teachers. In class, students felt free to play their radios—that is, when they attended; most students reported that they regularly skipped classes. Drinking and gambling became a part of the school parking-lot landscape, and the students even published an underground newspaper that kept them up-to-date on their legal rights, as well as strategies for cutting classes without being caught—not that the classes themselves were difficult or demanding. In fact, course requirements were reduced significantly. Electives were the choice of the day. Some students were revitalized by the new curriculum, but others took easy classes (called “gut” courses) and graduated from Hamilton without much to show for their high school years.

In 1978, a new principal came to the high school, a veteran educator considered tough enough to handle the problems. A uniform discipline
code for blacks and whites was established, administrators were taught to
back up teachers in their discipline efforts, and the avalanche of easy courses
was replaced by a more demanding curriculum. Student suspensions soared.
That year, thirty seniors who had cut too many classes were prohibited from
participating in graduation. Ever so slowly, adult authority was re-established,
and Hamilton’s experiment in rule by students came to an end.

NEW STUDENTS, OLD SCHOOL, 1980–1985

Racial desegregation and student protests radically changed Hamilton dur-
during the 1970s; the enrollment of students with disabilities sparked the
school’s second transformation. Although a new federal law (PL 94-142) re-
quired that special education students be mainstreamed and taught in regular
classes, the teachers were unprepared to respond to their needs, and a
number of Hamilton’s students were hostile to the new arrivals. Students
with disabilities were mainstreamed—and taunted. Mentally retarded, emo-
tionally disturbed, and physically disabled students both experienced and
casted frustration when placed in regular classrooms. During these years,
immigrants from Southeast Asia were introduced to Hamilton through the
English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Tension between the newly
arrived Vietnamese and Cambodian students and African Americans at
Hamilton led to fights. While Hamilton searched for peace and consensus
with its new student populations, some students escaped from reality
through drug use. By 1984, a third of Hamilton’s students were experiment-
ing with drugs, typically marijuana. However, an increase in adult authority
had checked the escalation of black-white tensions and had increased academic
demands. The decline in national test scores at Hamilton had stabi-
ized, and “white flight” had ceased. The school was settling down, but
Hamilton was not a particularly inspiring or dynamic institution. The academ-
ic star of the 1950s had become an academic has-been of the 1980s. Many
people were disappointed in their school. The disappointment at Hamilton
High has been felt in other communities. In 1983, A Nation at Risk was pub-
hlished, and it initiated a national evaluation of schools. How effective is our
educational system? Is it accomplishing its goals?