



Born to Rise: A Story of Children and Teachers Reaching Their Highest Potential

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Born to Rise is the inspiring account of Deborah Kenny's pursuit of social justice for our nation's most vulnerable children. Students enter Harlem Village Academies, the network of charter schools Kenny founded, several years behind grade level, but in just a few years they are transformed, ranking among the highest in the nation. How did they do it? For the first time, Kenny reveals the secret to creating a powerful workplace culture that attracts the most talented people and brings out their passion and highest performance—a culture that produces stunning student achievement results and teachers who regularly use words like “magical” to describe the workplace environment. It is a must-read for anyone who cares about children and the future of this country and for leaders who want to inspire fierce dedication in their employees.

Born to Rise: A Story of Children and Teachers Reaching Their Highest Potential Details

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From Reader Review Born to Rise: A Story of Children and Teachers Reaching Their Highest Potential for online ebook

Patrick says

I came in predisposed to dislike this, and it's hard to write a book specifically about your successes *without* sounding egotistical, but I am not finding the beginning as sympathetic as she intends. I'll post some links in my final review that critique her claims and vision.

Finished: Bleh. Propaganda and half truths.

Here's a cynical summary: She watched a TV special on inner-city schools and "discovered" that "the schools are bad." She then talked to some anti-public education people and "found out" that teachers and unions are lazy and don't care about kids. The horrible problems in urban schools are just because schools don't teach kids how to behave. Poverty is just an excuse. Some hard work and gumption is all they need to "escape" their bad schools and overcome their problems.

Therefore, if a lady "really cares" about kids like she does, she can just read a lot and become an "expert" on teaching. She can then find and hire "rock star" teachers who will totally accept her guruship, pay them much less per hour than regular teachers to work late, on Saturdays, and in the summer, and make kids sit up straight because she loves them, then Bam! her teachers are more passionate than regular teachers and her poor minority kids are better than in all the regular schools. Her student anecdotes and quotes prove it! Of course there are no other students who said negative things, and any teachers who complained were just "whiners" with bad attitudes. Her "values" policy and staffing emphasis is totally not code for "Don't complain about your low pay and bad working conditions, and don't *ever* disagree with Deborah Kenny." And "teacher ownership" is totally not code for "It's easy to fire anyone who does disagree with me."

Plus, if you doubt it, she had a terrible tragedy when her husband died from cancer, and she just knows that he approves of her schools so you should too. And that is totally relevant and not emotional manipulation. (Kenny frames this political, self-indulgently praising book with her husband's death constantly, so she sets herself up for this charge.)

So you can tell I found the book self-serving and a whitewash of the truth. Here is well-documented link that succinctly discusses how Harlem Village Academy "encourages" students to leave so their test scores look stellar. 75% of one recent beginning class of 5th graders had dropped out by 9th grade while the surrounding public schools grew by 45% in that same time. (Contrary to Kenny's wikipedia page which she obviously had edited by a crony to basically repeat her book.) She also demands teachers suffer her working conditions without complaining, and her schools feature 40-60% staff turnover *every year*.

Kenny on page 26: "There was nothing wrong with commercial success; I just didn't care about it." She repeats variations on this theme throughout the book.

Reality: She's getting millions of dollars of donations from the bigwig corporate "reformers" she schmoozed to get funding in the first place and paying herself over \$400,000 a year to be CEO of fewer than 700 students.

See here and here.

I think there are some wonderful things to think about and use in Kenny's *professed* ideals and almost gave the book two stars because of it. But the hypocrisy and constant bashing of every teacher and school besides hers turns this book into unethical propaganda.

Here's a final link to one of my favorite commenters on education reform, filled with the same sadness and cynicism I feel about these "miracle schools" and silver bullets meant to destroy public education for profit.

Mary says

I enjoyed reading about Kenny's journey to opening a charter school in NYC. When given the task to hire teachers that were going to fit with her school model it was difficult. This is the challenge that all instructional leaders tackle. Finding a teacher that has passion, internal motivation, willingness to do "whatever it takes", and will spend countless hours perfecting their craft is a lot harder than many believe. In the end, Kenny found that a positive school culture is the biggest part of a successful school. I tagged many pages in this book, so that I can keep referring to it as this 2013-14 school year unfolds.

Heather says

I normally find books about education both inspiring and depressing. This one, however, was almost solidly just inspiring. Though I maintain some skepticism about charter schools being the sought-after answer for education woes (that's the public school advocate in me), what inspired me about this book was not Deborah Kenny's journey toward starting successful charter schools in Harlem. The true inspiration came from Kenny's thoughts about what makes a great school. She recognized, before she even started the process to start a school, that a good school was not just following the formula of a successful school. I've read several other books where the school is started, is very successful, and then a formula is created. Those who read it are inspired to start a school following that same formula, with varying degrees of success.

Kenny, however, didn't present a formula at all. What she did was try to abandon the formula, in favor of creating a culture that trusted and supported the teachers. She recognized that good teachers were held back by the current system, and many found themselves burned out and defeated. Instead, she wanted teachers to thrive, to seek to improve because they are supported to improve, empowered to continually become the best teachers they could be. This is a belief I feel strongly about in education. I am adamantly opposed to scripted curricula (not that anyone has asked me!), because I feel it makes all teachers mediocre. The poor teachers might be brought up slightly to mediocre, but the good teachers, and the really great teachers, are not allowed to do what they can do so well. One quote in this book referred to scripted curriculum as "teacher proof", and I have definitely seen it used that way.

I think all those in education should read this book. Even those who are not supportive of charter schools in general will find something good in this book. I want to see more of this change coming through public schools, too. Teachers don't teach because they are too stupid to do anything else. Most teachers I know teach because at one time, they had passion for educating students. Igniting that passion while helping each individual continually make improvements is the way to make great schools, not bogging them down with more rules and curriculum guides, keeping them from teaching in the way that they best could teach.

Lyddie says

I almost bailed after reading the first half, which was all about her personal life and the great connections she made with Important People. The second half was more interesting, though I wouldn't say I loved the book or was especially inspired by it.

Leanne says

The book is inspiring, but what I liked most about it is that Deborah Kenny shares how difficult it was to put her ideals into practice. I believe passionately that we need educational reform in our nation. Deborah Kenny has written a blueprint on how it could be done. (May 2013)

I just finished re-reading Born to Rise, and once again, I am amazed and inspired. I keep asking myself, "Could I do this? Could I make a true difference in the education world?" I am so very impressed with Deborah Kenny, and I truly believe she earns every dollar of her salary. Why are people angry about how much she makes? Should the CEO who pushes soda earn more than the CEO who changes thousands of lives for the better? We live in a crazy world where people who serve other people are expected to do it for a pittance. I digress.....I simply wish there were more Deborah Kennys in the world....and truthfully, I would love to be one of them.

Jackalacka says

She is very inspiring with her story and it does give you hope that kids in high poverty neighborhoods like Harlem, have hope and a way out and I am drawn to some of the philosophy she shares in the book. For instance the theory of knowledge workers vs. production workers and the fact that teachers are being treated like the latter which leads to no ownership and disenfranchisement. She feels that those closest to the process have a lot of knowledge but are always being told what to do by bureaucrats. I like the mantra that "education is not about developing a product, it's about developing people." This book made me want to run out and work for her and start an education revolution!

However..... when I finished the book, I read up on Ms. Kenny and the HVA and was not thrilled with what I found. The turnover rates for teachers are huge and 2-3 times more than the public school district in Harlem. Also, Ms. Kenny makes 400K! <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/e...>

That's more than the chancellor of the public school district even makes. To top it off, I found several articles that show that the high rates of test scores her schools profess to garner aren't showing the full truth since the class cohorts have large attrition rates and not many of the kids who start out there, end up there and it seems to be that the talented stay and therefore of course that would raise the percentage of kids who meet benchmark testing. The local district gets the kids who don't make it at her schools. I think this is largely what happens in Oregon charter schools too. Those with parents who are educated and literate are the ones who are shopping around and can send their kids to a charter school so of course when your student population is entirely made up of families who are educated and middle-class or higher, then your test scores are higher but that's artificial data since your starting point was already ahead of those kids who go to public school and whose parents might not have much education and are working minimum wage jobs.

Overall, the debate still rages on over charter schools and I was hoping that Harlem Village Academies was the miracle school that I hear it to be. I'm still happy for the kids who do go there but hope that Ms. Kenny straightens some of these bumps in her road so that HVA can be stellar.

Andy says

The premise of this book is that the Harlem Village Academies are doing an amazing job educating poor

urban kids. We know they are because the CEO tells us so. Hooray for her!!! It would be easier to believe her though if she presented better evidence of success.

I looked at official reports on student achievement for Harlem Village schools (links below). Overall, the results are not spectacular. For example, 38% of high schoolers are college ready vs. 70% for the comparison group. Some other results are less awful, but overall I honestly don't understand what there is to be excited about here. Maybe I am missing something.

For folks interested in what works for improving urban schools, I would recommend:

<http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolRepor...>

<http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolRepor...>

Sortal says

Kenny makes her charter schools sound like paradise. Her professed ideals are laudable and her brief comments on classroom behaviour management are spot on. Despite the fact that half the book is over before a charter school even opens, it's surprisingly readable.

What makes me doubt the whole enterprise is how little teachers, students, and families feature in the story. Only a handful of anecdotes and quotations represent their views. If Kenny truly values teachers as much as she claims to, why isn't more of the book about teachers?

Samantha says

The book begins with a description of her dreams as a child and how she later coped with her husband's death. These sections moved me as a reader without boring me and making me feel as though Deborah Kenny was too dramatic or depressing. Yet, as the novel progresses, there seems to be a disconnect between her passion and emotions for her family and for her aspirations. She focuses more on the latter making me question how she balanced the two. Her aspirations and accomplishments are stunning and inspirational but it is questionable how a woman who was not an experienced teacher, who did not have a background in education, suddenly began pursuing educational reform. It seems to me as though she merely threw herself into a big project after her husband died as a coping mechanism. I've also read a couple articles and reviews about Harlem Village Academics and it seems there is a disconnect between what she writes about the school, how much she pays herself, how many teachers drop out, and how many kids stay in the schools. Of course this is an autobiography which does make the book entirely biased though. If you can look past all of that, not a bad book.

Natalie says

I wanted to like this book more than I did. I thought too much time was spent on talking about meetings with "very important people". I also kept thinking about all the time she spent away from her own kids in order to

start this school. I would have rather read more about the workings of the school.

Kathy says

"Only 29% of children in high poverty communities are reading at grade level." "There was not a single urban school district in America where all children are reading at grade level - not one." Out of 34 developed countries, the United States is ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science and 25th in math, yet the United States spends the MOST per capita for education. Deborah Kenny is one person who sought to change those statistics. Armed with a PhD in Comparative International Education from Columbia University, a background in child development in the corporate realm and an incessant desire to read and to learn, Kenny accomplished an amazing feat. She proved all children could learn and succeed. It did not matter what their socioeconomic status was. It did not matter what their families were like. It did not matter if a particular curriculum was followed. Every child could learn. Kenny founded the Harlem Village Academies, two charter schools in Harlem, NYC. Children were accepted by lottery. Students accepted were tested to be several years below grade level. Within three years, 99% of the children tested at grade level. How could she in just three years accomplish this result ...something not possible in every other urban public school. Kenny identified what SHE thought to be the major problems in education....but determined the Teachers' Union to be the most detrimental. She cited tenure and the protection of incompetent teachers as just two from a litany of grievances Kenny had with unions. Charter schools are not unionized. She discovered that conservative groups wanted standards and testing. On the other hand progressive groups wanted no testing. Kenny sought to hire the highest quality teachers and empower them not to teach "to the test" but to teach "above the test". What the children were learning in the classroom was to be more challenging than a standardized test. Therefore the students would have no problem mastering "the test". Her methods to attain teacher accountability are similar to concepts she learned from Peter Drucker and Jack Welch in the corporate world as well as from Viktor Frankl's philosophy in "Man's Search for Meaning". I am troubled by the educational system, but Deborah Kenny has presented a proven plan. The first class of HVA graduated in 2011....and that class is now attending college.

Kimberly Lee says

Teaching is hard. Starting a school is hard. Writing about the process seems like it might have been the easy part. I very much enjoyed reading about Deborah Kenny's journey. I have family members who work in inner-city NYC schools - and know about the work, dedication and commitment it takes. There are also great rewards to be had - and most of those will never be known by the teacher. Students will be out there living and thriving and fundamentally changed.

As the jacket says - this is both a memoir and a manifesto. I really was inspired to get out there and be a teaching superstar.

Only unfortunate bit - the jacket blurb by Bill Cosby. Delete in future editions?

Tracie says

Well written and interesting story on Kenny and her quest to start a charter school. She and I share many of

the same ideas about schools, especially about how teachers ought to be treated and ought to have more freedom. This book gave me some good ideas I would like to try in my classroom, and it certainly showed me that school reform and starting schools are not nearly as easy as everybody tries to claim. I also wrote down the books she read so I could read them as well. My only criticisms would be that she sounded quite egotistical in the book. I think she was trying to be humble, but it didn't come across sometimes. It also worried me that she wasn't a teacher, she just talked to experts and read some books. And she would judge teachers based on what seemed like one observation and interview. Which isn't enough, especially because classrooms have bad days and she isn't a teacher herself. I would have loved to hear more testimonies from teachers and students in the school. Not just quips. But overall I liked the story itself.

Carmen says

This was an interesting and inspiring quick read. Especially interesting because I am a social work intern at one of the HVA schools. I liked it, minus a few things:

- I wish she'd talked about unions a little more, explaining her shift towards distrusting them, instead of just talking about that at the end of the book. I am still a little skeptical about the anti-union stuff. I disagree with her assessment that it's all up to teachers. I agree that teachers should be held accountable, but only to a certain extent. There really ARE things teachers can't control.

- I also wish she had addressed some other controversies around charter schools, like that they take students and thus funding from other neighborhood public schools.

- I couldn't help notice the racial undertones and power dynamics of a white woman (and largely white staff) telling black children how to act and I wish that had been addressed in the book.

Heidi says

I read with interest Ms. Kenny's ambitious desire to start a charter school in Harlem; the achievements of that first school and those that followed are commendable. In my career as a public school educator, I have heard many negative comments regarding low test scores, out-of-control students, and lackluster teaching which are described in this book. While I disagree that unions in general want to keep all teachers employed, regardless of ability, I do feel that the "rules" governing the public education system sometimes make it difficult for teachers to do the best job possible. One passage in the book really spoke to me: a corporate leader describing his management philosophy as being about people and culture (page 195) -- "You hire people you trust completely to do the job. Then you create a culture that enables them to do their best work. That's it. You have to appreciate and support people and take away the roadblocks so they can do their job." If all administrators, in public, charter, and private schools, adhered to this sentiment, more high-quality teaching would take place. I do wonder at about the equity regarding students in the Harlem Village Academies--do those schools include special needs students in the same percentage as surrounding public schools? Are students whose first language is not English similarly included? Also, when did the title and subtitle change? My copy is titled, "Born to Rise: A Story of Children and Teachers Reaching Their Highest Potential." Overall, a good book that has made me think more about my teaching methods and the culture of my own school.
