

*The Schenley Experiment: A Social History of Pittsburgh's First Public High School.*  
By JAKE ORESICK. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press,  
2017. 216 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$19.95.)

Jake Oresick has written a fascinating history of Pittsburgh's Schenley High School. This concise volume, however, chronicles more than just the history of one school; Oresick also uses Schenley's story to elucidate the history of Pittsburgh and, to an even wider extent, public education in the United States.

Schenley was born out of a reform movement taking place across the US in the early twentieth century. Most early high schools were either academic or vocational, but as Oresick points out, Schenley represented the city's flagship in a wider effort in which public high schools would incorporate both avenues of study. Built in the "Hill District," a vibrant neighborhood of Jewish immigrants and an emergent black community, Schenley also attracted excellent teachers. It thus drew students from across the metropolitan area, prompting Oresick to characterize it as an "unintentional magnet school a half century before that concept existed" (22). Further, at this time, when racism excluded blacks from educational opportunities in many American cities, Schenley represented a comparative bastion of racial liberalism.

During the Great Depression, enrollments at Schenley exploded. In the 1940s, Jewish enrollment declined while Schenley became more important to the Hill District's growing number of black residents. A major urban development project in the 1950s split the Hill District in two and fed more African Americans into Schenley. As white Pittsburghers also moved to the suburbs, Schenley became a majority African American school. By the early 1970s, asserts Oresick, the quality of education at Schenley had fallen precipitously.

Pittsburgh Public Schools attempted to revitalize the district (and deal with a court order to desegregate) by creating magnet programs. Schenley's unique magnet programs—in International Baccalaureate, International Studies, and others—drew students across Pittsburgh from their neighborhood schools. Schenley thus revived its reputation in the city.

By the 1990s, Schenley had become "hip," and Oresick dubs it the "School of Choice" during this era (92). It was also a model of economic and racial diversity in a segregated city.

The success of Schenley brought problems elsewhere, however, and so helps readers to understand the contradiction of school choice in the United States. When schools compete with each other for students, some win and others lose. Schenley's successes, Oresick argues, "dealt a critical blow to successful neighborhood high schools," which in turn facilitated a growing narrative that Pittsburgh schools were in decline (102). Consequently, the political will for paying for schools declined. When Schenley needed funds to renovate its almost hundred-year-old building in 2005, the high estimate of refurbishing an asbestos-filled

infrastructure led the city schools superintendent (a descendant of Theodore Roosevelt) and the school board to close Schenley in 2008. The district shifted students elsewhere, and the most prominent magnet program was reconstituted as Barack Obama International Studies Academy.

Those interested in the city of Pittsburgh, urban education, and school choice will have Oresick to thank for this fine book. At just over two hundred total pages, the book is succinct, and the prose is readable. The numerous high quality images—from a photograph of former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt visiting Schenley in 1952 to one of the 2007 state title-winning basketball team featuring future NBA star DeJuan Blair—are an added bonus.

*University of Wisconsin–Green Bay*

JON SHELTON