



**MAN OVERBOARD:
Confessions of a Novice Math
Teacher in the Bronx**

By Ric Klass

(Seven Locks, 282 pages, \$17.95)

When Ric Klass closed his private equity firm in affluent Greenwich, Connecticut, to become a math teacher at an unnamed New York City school he refers to as Central Bronx High, he wanted to live the whole movie—the one in which an idealistic teacher triumphs over the odds to transform the dead-end lives of inner city kids. A week before he started teaching, he actually watched *Blackboard Jungle*; *To Sir, With Love*; and *Stand and Deliver* to pump himself up. And Klass did get his movie, but it wasn't *To Sir, With Love*. It wasn't even *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. It was *Armageddon*.

Klass recounts his disheartening experiences with rueful, self-deprecatory humor—and an occasional mixed metaphor. (“In the air, I smell the beginning of a long series of bureaucratic obstacles to smooth sailing.”) His book, which takes the form of a diary, belongs to a popular and growing genre that also includes Brendan Halpin’s *Losing My Faculties*, Esmé Raji Codell’s *Educating Esmé*, and Elizabeth Gold’s *Brief Intervals of Horrible Sanity*. All these books chronicle what happens when a novice, “full of hope and other misconceptions,” discovers the yawning gap between the heroic-teacher movie playing in his or her head and the grim realities of teaching in an understaffed, overcrowded, impoverished urban school.

In Klass’ case, his students aren’t the eager and grateful learners he expected; they’re belligerent, disruptive, and shockingly unprepared for high school. They don’t know how many inches are in a foot or how many days are in a year. Their ignorance frightens and infuriates Klass.

But he’s better at depicting the problems at CBHS—incompetent administrators, burned-out teachers, missing parents—than at devising solutions. He himself cuts and runs at the end of the school year. That’s not an option open to everyone, especially the students, who are crippled by neglect and mired in failure. What’s just an entertaining war story for readers is a real war for them.

**MAKING ART TOGETHER:
How Collaborative Art-Making Can
Transform Kids, Classrooms, and
Communities**

By Mark Cooper and Lisa Sjoström

(Beacon, 152 pages, \$26.95)

Students don’t have to paint like Da Vinci to make worthwhile art, and teachers who have never picked up a paintbrush can still use collaborative art projects to enrich their teaching and the world at large.

That’s the upbeat message of this humane book by Boston-based artist Mark Cooper and educational consultant Lisa Sjoström. They want us to let go of “the old, very unhelpful idea” that only special people are capable of making art. To illustrate this premise, the book is illustrated with more than 90 photos of wonderful sculptures, murals, and billboards Cooper helped students and teachers across the country create.

The authors emphasize that art shouldn’t be something that kids do only in art class or as an extracurricular activity. Art-making, they say, can be “a powerful entry point into every subject at every grade level.”

They offer the example of East Hartford High, a tough urban school in Connecticut where a teacher with no art background worked with colleagues and students to create a sculpture that dealt with the aftermath of 9/11. The piece wound up exhibited at the Connecticut Statehouse, but she was more gratified that kids from a neighborhood fractured by violence and poverty learned to get along. As the authors explain, “When you make collaborative art ... you’re working together with your neighbor ... to produce something fascinating and original you couldn’t possibly make on your own.”

Some consider art a waste of time and money. It’s often one of the first things cut from the school budget. But art isn’t fluff. Art is about findings things out, a means of investigation and discovery, just like science or math. “[T]he thrill and *aha!* of thinking creatively, so central to any artistic endeavor, is also essential to education,” the authors proclaim. People need to hear this more than ever now that federal oversight is the law of the land and schools are preoccupied with standardized testing.

**BUILDING ENGAGED SCHOOLS:
Getting the Most Out of America’s
Classrooms**

By Gary Gordon with Steve Crabtree

(Gallup, 316 pages, \$24.95)

The history of school reform in the United States might best be summarized as “no change, little progress.” Despite the standards and testing prevalent today, schools haven’t improved appreciably since the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* was in effect, that American students perform like a bunch of slackers when compared to the rest of the developed world.

In this book, Gary Gordon, vice president and practice leader of The Gallup Organization’s education division, attempts to explain. He thinks we’ve been focusing on the wrong things. If we want to improve schools, we should forget about perfect curricula, or, for that matter, toughening accountability measures. We should be paying closer attention to “the talent and the engagement level of the people within an individual school.”

This, of course, contradicts the one-size-fits-all approach of the No Child Left Behind Act. “A high-quality education isn’t something that can be mandated by law,” Gordon pointedly writes. He adds that NCLB largely undercuts academic achievement because schools now emphasize “getting all students to average, not to excellence.”

Drawing on a management model from the private sector that puts people and processes, Gordon claims that nothing has had a greater impact on students, for better or worse, than the quality of their teachers: “people invited to teach in our schools are the X-factor that invariably makes the difference in student learning.” It’s more essential that instead of simply filling teaching vacancies, school administrators “hold out for talent.”

Most don’t. There’s a belief—on which NCLB has done a lot to foster—that teachers are interchangeable parts in a standard-driven machine. What bull. You can turn the curriculum inside out and the process means for delivering it, but until you care for the kids—and, more important, care for the teachers—you really don’t know anything about teaching.

—Howard