

FORUM

"... And Some Have (Excellence) Thrust Upon Them"

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In this section Hullihan suggests that many American schools are neutral stages where the reality of the students' socioeconomic standing plays out. Schools with large enrollments of the "well born" always claim "excellence" when, in fact, they do little more than enroll children already prepared for success. Power speaks of the hollowness of calls for an equal opportunity to learn from those who ignore our inequities in school funding and Richmond explains why disappointment must follow when school reforms are attempted by a splintering society. Finally, Hullihan suggests that, since inner city youths are rarely prepared for success by their families and neighborhoods, neutral schools only guarantee their failure.

Dans cet article, Hullihan croit que plusieurs écoles américaines sont neutres, c'est-à-dire la réalité socio-économique des étudiant-es est ignorée. Les écoles qui sont majoritairement fréquentées par des étudiant-es fortuné-es se disent excellentes alors qu'en fait, elles ne font que recruter des jeunes qui sont déjà marqués par le succès. Power souligne l'inutilité des requêtes, pour des chances égales d'apprendre, auprès de ceux qui ignorent les inégalités du financement scolaire. Richmond explique l'émergence du désapointement lorsque des réformes scolaires sont mises de l'avant par une société fragmentée. Finalement, Hullihan croit que parce que les jeunes des "basse-villes" sont rarement préparés pour le succès par la famille et l'environnement, les écoles neutres ne font que garantir leur échec.

After dinner, we drove downtown to our parish school, now a historical landmark encircled by government buildings, banks, and retirement condominiums. We parked on the playground and, while our youngest ran ahead to his classroom, the rest of us climbed the two flights of stairs to

the auditorium. Once inside, we were immediately caught up in embracing and talking warmly to the other families who, like ourselves, seemed always to have three generations present. Only our youngest child was still enrolled there. Our other three had all gone there from kindergarten through the eighth grade but now attended the Diocesan High School. Taking our seats, we once again faced a completely predictable evening. My interest would peak during the five minutes our child's class was on stage to sing exactly two songs, then drop sharply as each of the other eight grades sang theirs. Relief would come in three forms, when the curtain was closed between acts making conversation among ourselves possible, when the soloists performed, and during a stop for ice cream at Howard Johnsons on the way home.

Once that night, between acts, my mother-in-law spoke to me. She normally remained silent in public to better overhear the private conversation of strangers nearby. She said that a few days earlier, "in a poor section of town," as two Black school girls boarded the city bus she was riding, one asked the other, "Is you did your French?" She told me of the incident not to slur the girls, but to suggest again the nation's educators were probably the authors of many of the problems they now faced. Being a teacher myself, which of course she knew, I began again searching for a way to deny the charge, but the curtain opened and a soloist appeared.

Each year each soloist either juggles, tumbles, unicycles, sings, dances, or plays a musical instrument even though the school offers no instruction in these skills. The audience then generously applauds both the school and the soloists, while raising an interesting question in the process. Might not our school's reputation for discipline, for causing most children to learn to read and count, and for its legendary sense of community be much more the assembled families' doing than its own? Certainly, most schools in this country are neutral in these matters. They achieve discipline only with disciplined children, subject mastery only with the children of parents who know what that looks and sounds like, and a sense of community only where parents have already made their children's education a priority. Their neutrality is clearly revealed by the fact that the best predictor of how preschoolers will fare in our schools continues to be the

socioeconomic standing of their parents: the higher that standing the greater their success.

One way to capitalize on this inclination to applaud schools for tendencies, skills, attitudes, and dispositions developed elsewhere is to open a private school. There is little risk involved because, by popular measures of quality schooling, the school will be declared "excellent" even before it opens. First, buy land near the bedroom communities of successful young marrieds. Next, hire an architect and builder to complement that land with a tastefully designed preparatory school. Then, advertise internationally and outbid other schools for one of the most prestigious faculties yet assembled. Finally, by featuring faculty resumes, advertise for and enroll a gifted, multi-talented student body. It now must follow that, on "moving in" weekend, having brought the students, parents, and faculty together for a Sunday banquet, the Headmaster will easily gain the teachers a standing ovation simply by reading the degrees they hold and honors they have won. The students will be given sustained applause as their average SAT score is read, and already prominent student essayists, debaters, mathematicians, scientists, swimmers, divers, gymnasts, pianists, artists, and the like are invited to stand.

Later, as the day ends and the parents of the resident students walk to their cars and the day students and their parents walk to theirs, each group will independently come to the same conclusion: "This is an excellent school." None will feel constrained by the fact that classes there have not yet begun.

But, since this kind of excellence is recruited more than created, by what measure should we assess schools? By traditional gauges, the private schools enjoy a significant edge. Given enough "good kids" from "good homes" their national test scores will be impressive and their clubs and teams will sparkle with scholar-athletes. But, by fairer indicators tied to student growth as measured against their entering knowledge base and general readiness-to-learn, it is a certainty that faculties in some of our inner city schools are teaching rings around instructors in the prestigious private schools.

We have often read and heard that American parochial¹ schools routinely succeed (cause their students to learn) even in neighborhoods where the public schools routinely fail. The traditional explanation for their success given by reporters and academics who have gone to look includes such words and phrases as dedication, homework, school uniforms, parental involvement, the three R's, and prayer in the schools. But such explanations come from accepting rather than testing the premise that inner city parochial and public schools both work with similar student populations. They don't! It simply does not hold that children from various dwellings in the same residential area, even when they are of the same race or ethnic group and social class, are essentially the same. The very act of finding the tuition dollars or a tuition waiver for the private schooling of one's children suggests a child-centered, protective, generally nurturing home life which, unfortunately, can be significantly different from life for the children next door.

Dysfunctional families are spread among all income groups and parochial schools enroll students from such homes. However, their numbers never overwhelm. Parents who enroll their children in a parochial school know they are entering a community of families which, while financially supporting the school, also creates there a system of mainstream behavioral expectations that each feels. One need only attend one of their fish fries, carnivals, or Christmas pageants to sense not only abundant good will but also their ever-present accountability system which says: "Behold these beloved children. Draw near if you would be a positive force in their lives. But endanger them, threaten their innocence or developing respect for self and others, and we shall immediately invoke powerful sanctions against you."

Good heavens, who could not teach in such places? Especially since the teachers will be given total credit for all that the children accomplish.

But in fact, the majority of our public schools have always matched or exceeded the parochial schools in causing children to learn. This occurs in almost any public school serving neighborhoods whose adult residents regularly model the mainstream behaviors they demand of all who live and

work there. National polls of our attitudes toward our public schools continue to report high levels of satisfaction with the school just down the street but serious dissatisfaction with public schooling nationally. Said another way, residents in "good" neighborhoods know what's happening in their public schools and they approve. However, through books, articles, movies, and TV they are aware also of the massive problems in inner city schools and they are confused and afraid. They're afraid such problems might spread to their own schools. They're confused because they thought this country fixed its educational injustices when it required that equal access to public schooling for all children in the 1950s. Their confusion is understandable because many of us comfortably assumed equal access to the public schools assured our children access to equally good schools as well. But, this has not occurred. Equal access to public schooling has been achieved but the equal opportunity to learn has not. Instead, many of our nation's children attend "difficult schools," a euphemism for those sometimes dangerous, always depressing campuses which are forever failing in all of their functions at once.

Many of us still pleased with the public school just down the block were raised in small-town America and moved to the cities for better jobs. What we left were successful communities. They worked because their basic institutions worked. Our families provided for us and held us accountable for our actions. Our neighborhoods, churches, and schools were safe, friendly places, but they held us accountable; our towns offered us increased freedom of movement, yet held us accountable nevertheless. Later, as parents ourselves, we left the cities for the suburbs to shield our own children from the full force of irresponsible behavior which seemed to be escalating in this open society we've loved so long. But there was no shielding of the inner city youth we left behind. They are born into places where crime and welfare are the most reasonably attainable career choices and where social sanctions against antisocial acts have almost disappeared. There, the primary institutions are fictions. With too few exceptions, inner city families, neighborhoods, and communities are not accountability systems at all and should be given different labels so thso this self-destructive flaw will be more apparent and treatable. Any human environment which becomes incapable of holding its residents accountable

for their actions will soon witness a massive loss of all sense of responsibility there as well. Public schools, whose student bodies are almost entirely made up of children who must live midst this anarchy, are overwhelmed and out of control.

Parochial schools which have not yet closed in such places become the beneficiaries of self-selecting student bodies. Loving, nurturing parents scattered too thinly through our chaotic inner cities arrive at these schools seeking sanctuary for their still disciplined, still teachable children. Next come the reporters and professors to marvel at and record the academic accomplishments of these schools located but a few blocks from public schools where students are found to be unteachable.

Reporters and professors render a far greater service when they locate and describe successful inner city public schools — schools which cannot select their students, yet refuse to be neutral as to whether or not they will become disciplined, learn to read and count, and experience a sense of community. Staffed by skilled, supportive, yet demanding teachers and administrators they totally reject the suggestion their students "cannot learn." Instead, each day, all day, they continuously help their students to achieve honest, frequent, significant successes in their efforts to understand. These are the only excellent schools we have in America. Most private schools and many of our public schools in "good" neighborhoods make the excellence claim but that award really belongs to the families who send them their children.

Just how excellent inner city schools appear and initially sustain themselves involves stories unique to each. But such schools must become the norm in our cities, and quickly. Perhaps the two Black girls on the city bus who were so concerned about their French class came from just such a public school. One could choose to believe their teachers had obviously bungled the girls' placement in the school's curriculum. However, it is much more likely they had earned their way into French; that French was absolutely the logical next step in their academic progress; and that the slip into "Is you did ..." merely reminds they have had many more "teachers" than those provided by their schools.

Over ice cream that evening, my son ate enthusiastically while his grandmother and I continued our discussion; a discussion she abruptly ended as the table nearest us began filling with strangers talking openly.

¹Parochial schools are private elementary and/or secondary schools which are wholly financed and operated by religious bodies.