



Courting the Middle Class

What can schools do to keep parents from going private, or moving to the suburbs?

Nora Carr

Fueled by optimism and driven to succeed, middle- and upper-middle-class families—and those who aspire to join their ranks—are cherished by public schools.

It's easy to see why. Better educated and more affluent, middle-class families tend to send their children to school ready (and eager) to learn. And, as 45 percent of American voters, middle-class families also serve as public schools' most ardent volunteers, advocates, and fundraisers.

Yet school districts across the country—especially those in the nation's largest cities—are reporting alarming increases in middle-class flight, as more economically able families of all races opt for private and

parochial schools, or schools in the farther-flung suburbs.

Reasons for the exodus vary, from soaring housing prices that make good neighborhoods with strong public schools a

luxury fewer families can afford, to the well-publicized and persistent myth that most—if not all—public schools are failing.

ANXIETY FUELS DEBATE

Once as revered as mom and apple pie, the public school brand has crashed and burned spectacularly since the 1970s, when the general public and most parents believed their children's schools were better than when they attended them.

Long-term studies by Public Agenda show that the percentage of the public expressing a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in America's public schools has

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declined from 54 percent in 1977 to just 37 percent in 2005.

According to Public Agenda, Americans strongly support public school reform over alternatives such as vouchers, yet most also express widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, with 68 percent calling for some major change and 15 percent indicating that only a total overhaul will do.

The majority of parents—61 percent—still give public schools high marks, but the public vs. private debate seems to be accelerating, especially in urban areas where catchphrases such as “America’s failing public schools” often go unchallenged.

An increasing number of middle-class families worry that public education is so focused on “teaching to the test” and meeting the needs of at-risk learners that their children will be left behind. With reading, writing, and mathematics dominating state testing programs and district curricula, parents are concerned that art, music, foreign languages, social studies, and other college-prep subjects are getting short shrift.

As a result, private school tuition—once considered a luxury—is now viewed as a necessity by many middle-class families, including two-income households earning \$75,000 or less.

“I’m a mom of a preschooler and am starting to wonder if I’m going to really do a disservice to my child next year by not sending him to private school or moving to Lamorinda for their schools,” reads one posting on the Berkeley Parents Network, an online chat room and resource for California parents that could serve as a primer for school officials trying to gain insight into middle-class anxieties about public education.

Noting that “just about everyone I’ve come in contact with at (her child’s) preschool, the park, the grocery store seems to be frantically trying to get their child into a private school, or is moving ... just to get into a good school district.” The preschool mom concludes by writing: “It seems like such a frenzy, this school thing! Is it like this everywhere in the U.S.? Am I nuts to think

my son will get a decent education in the Oakland schools? Will my child suffer later in life for not getting as good an education as someone in Orinda or Head Royce, etc.?”

RECLAIMING MIDDLE-CLASS PARENTS

To win back middle-class parents, school leaders must seize the agenda and focus the rhetoric on public education’s successes rather than its challenges.

Middle-class parents, and those who aspire to join them, are an optimistic bunch. They believe that hard work and a good education are the key drivers of success, not family income or connections.

According to a recent analysis of middle-class voters conducted by the Third Way, a progressive think tank, “Nine out of 10 Americans credit their ‘own effort and abilities’ for their financial success, and 39 percent say a ‘good education’ is an ‘essential factor for getting ahead in life.’” In the same study, “only 11 percent of Americans say it is essential to come from a wealthy family to get ahead in America, and only 16 percent say it is essential to know the right people.”

To attract middle-class parents, school leaders need to talk more about arts education, gifted programs, and college prep classes. Respect and responsibility, two hallmarks of most character education programs, also resonate with middle- and upper-middle-class values.

While increasing test scores, meeting the needs of at-risk students, and fixing low performing schools are critical goals, if these items dominate the public debate, school leaders inadvertently fuel middle-class parents’ fears that their children’s needs are somehow being sacrificed.

Unfortunately, many public school districts are hesitant to wage an all-out campaign to win back middle-class parents, fearing accusations of elitism, racism, or worse.

While acknowledging targeted and systematic efforts to “court the middle class,” it’s interesting to note that most districts contacted for this article didn’t want to com-

ment on the record due to concerns about political fallout in their local communities.

The irony is that research shows virtually all parents from all racial and socioeconomic groups share middle- and upper-middle-class aspirations, so appeals that target more affluent parents generally will resonate with all other groups. For example, the Third Way study shows that “78 percent of Americans say they are doing ‘fairly well’ financially, including 56 percent of households with annual incomes of less than \$20,000.”

A nation of optimists views education as the gateway to the American Dream. As a result, parents and taxpayers will respond better to messages about opportunities, hard work, and achievement than doom and gloom about ill-prepared children, low test scores, struggling teachers, and inadequate funding.

Flush with middle-class students, suburban districts may not share the same sense of urgency that urban educators have about socioeconomic flight from public schools. Such a view is incredibly shortsighted, however. Urban districts and the students they serve are public education’s canaries in the mine. How they fare impacts everyone.

Detroit and St. Louis offer stark examples where once-insulated suburban districts now face many of the same issues typically found only in urban areas. Not surprising, these communities also have seen a decade of decline economically, as major employers relocate for greener pastures.

Most economic development experts agree that cities must find a way to halt white and socioeconomic flight to suburban bedroom communities. Schools are a key ingredient in either accelerating—or de-accelerating—these trends.

COURTING COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENTS

Houston Independent School District is trying to reverse this trend by fostering a college-bound culture for all students. A minority-majority school system, HISD

wants all of its 210,000 students and their parents to view a college education as a realistic and attainable goal, so it is pouring resources into pre-kindergarten programs, automatically enrolling middle-school students in college gateway courses, funding PSAT exams for all 10th graders, creating personal education plans, and boosting Advanced Placement offerings.

As a result, AP enrollment in HISD for ninth- and 10th-graders has increased exponentially, soaring more than 800 percent since 2001. Dual credit enrollment also has increased dramatically, especially among Latino and Hispanic students.

“From start to finish, children and their parents [have to] be able to see college in their future,” says Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra. “HISD must make college preparedness and awareness a part of every child’s public school experience.”

While it’s too early to know if HISD’s college-bound message will win back middle-class parents, the initiative is resonating with district parents, more than 80 percent of whom are considered economically disadvantaged.

Courting college-bound students—and their families—represents a powerful marketing strategy for public schools, however. Middle-class families want to support public education, and most polls show they’d rather fix public schools than abandon them.

With private school tuition exceeding \$15,000 to \$20,000 per year or more for top schools, the well-documented middle-class squeeze means better marketing of public school opportunities could have a significant impact.

While private schools often win in terms of smaller class sizes and more personalized attention, public schools typically have more highly qualified—and credentialed—teachers, better classroom instruction, a deeper and richer curriculum, more advanced course offerings, and more flexibility and services for meeting student special needs.

Public school students also learn how to

The Hot-Button Issues for Parents

Middle class families want what all families want: a better life for their children. Here’s what research consistently shows are hot-button issues for most parents:

■ **Good Test Scores:** Like it or not, test scores serve as a filter through which all other school information must flow. While parents’ comfort levels vary in terms of what an acceptable score is—and most even admit that one week or one day of scores isn’t all that important, especially when it comes to their child’s performance—when shopping for schools, the first thing most parents turn to are test scores. As a general rule of thumb, parents with options won’t even consider schools with less than 80 percent of students on grade level.

■ **Basic Skills:** While pundits and public policy wonks fret over accountability systems, “authentic parent involvement,” and “rigorous curriculum,” most parents just want schools to know if their child can read, write, spell, and “do math.”

■ **Liberal Arts:** While parents support the basics, they don’t want to sacrifice art, music, foreign languages, science, and physical education to do so. The best private schools find ways to do both, and that’s what public school parents want, too.

■ **College Prep:** From elementary school gifted programs to Advanced Placement courses and International Baccalaureate diplomas, parents are looking for anything that will give their kids an advantage in college admissions. What about free SAT/ACT or college essay prep classes?

■ **After-School Activities:** Once the bastion of stay-at-home soccer moms, many private schools now cater to two-income families. The result? Kids can now learn to play the piano, take gymnastics, tackle karate, or get homework assistance during after-school activities. Public schools that still view after school primarily as child-care programs are missing prime marketing opportunities.

■ **Safety, Discipline, and Personal Responsibility:** Safety, always a concern for school shoppers, has been heightened this year in the wake of school shootings in Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Typically, however, parents worry more about unruly students hijacking the teacher’s attention or bullies making their children’s lives miserable than they do about random and extreme acts of violence. Since many assume public schools are out of control—thanks in large measure to sensational news reports and inflamed political rhetoric—public school leaders can’t just tell parents and the public their schools are safe; they have to show them.

■ **Raising Good Kids—and Good Citizens:** It’s no secret that high-achieving parents are often highly competitive, especially when it comes to their offspring. Most parents, however, also recognize that good citizenship and old-fashioned values like honesty, respect, and responsibility need reinforcement at school, even if the primary teaching happens at home. That’s why anti-bullying programs, community service projects, and character education initiatives are popular with parents, whether they choose public, private, or parochial schools.

get along with students from all different kinds of backgrounds and cultures, a key selling point for parents, who are acutely aware of today's global economy. The insular nature of most private schools, where students are more likely to meet other people just like themselves, just can't compete with 12 years of living, working, and playing in public schools' diverse environments.

As one public school parent noted on the Berkeley Parents Network: "For me, public schools in partnership with supportive parents do a good job preparing kids for college and for life. Private schools do an excellent job of preparing kids for college but don't give kids as many 'life skills.' I see benefits and pitfalls in both."

DEPLOYING TARGETED COMMUNICATIONS

The key difference in appealing to middle class vs. at-risk families may not be in the messaging, however, but in the methods of communications used to various target groups. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), for example, a public opinion poll of district parents regarding communication showed marked differences between African-American and white responders, and between households with incomes below \$50,000 and those who earn \$50,000 or higher.

For example, while the primary way most parents get information about CMS is

from their child's school—the top source for all groups—African-American parents were more likely to rely on this method. Top sources for district level information, however, included daily newspaper and local television news outlets.

Again, preferences varied by race, with white parents much more likely to get information from the *Charlotte Observer* and African-American parents much more likely to get information from local television newscasts.

Differences in socioeconomic status also play a role, although the impact isn't as great as some might expect. Although CMS's student poverty rate is close to 50 percent, 84 percent of all parents report having access to the Internet and 69 percent subscribe to cable television.

As a result, 92 percent of CMS parents who subscribe to cable are aware of the CMS TV news channel, and 66 percent report watching school board meetings, news updates, a feature magazine, and other locally produced shows.

What does all this mean for winning in the court of public opinion? One-size-fits-all communication doesn't work any better than one-size-fits-all teaching, and neither does overwhelming busy parents with reams of print materials laden with education jargon. Face-to-face communication and relationship building are still essential,

but both need to be bolstered by highly targeted marketing efforts and more aggressive media relations programs.

"If it's not on TV, it's not on," says Terry Abbott, HISD's spokesman and the former chief of staff for former U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige. "You have to aggressively manage the media by promoting positive news and defending against the negative."

With public education constantly under attack, school leaders need to wage a "permanent campaign" to win more battles for public education, Abbott says. School systems also have to excel at providing the top-notch customer service parents expect at schools and district offices. Unfortunately, at many schools, the atmosphere parents encounter feels more like the Department of Motor Vehicles than Nordstrom's.

An increasing number of school districts nationwide are conducting customer service audits that review everything from the physical environment to how parents are greeted in person, via e-mail, or on the phone. Better public relations may bring parents to the schoolhouse door, but only strong teachers, high expectations, and a caring environment will keep them there. ■

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