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# Improve the City: Send Your Kids to Its Schools

Jane C. Murphy

*University of Baltimore School of Law, [jmurphy@ubalt.edu](mailto:jmurphy@ubalt.edu)*

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# Improve the city, send your kids to its schools

January 10, 2000 | By Jane Murphy

WHEN Martin O'Malley was sworn in as mayor last month, he asked Baltimore residents to "accept responsibility" for "making a difference" in the city.

For parents who are looking for a way to make a difference, I have a suggestion: Consider sending your children to a public school.

For some this suggestion may seem too modest to be meaningful. Most, however, would dismiss it as naive. The conventional wisdom is that the public schools are in terrible shape and no parent with the financial resources would make such a decision. But such reasoning reflects the prevailing narrow vision of community and good citizenship.

The classical definition of citizenship was framed in terms of duties -- citizens were obligated to take their turn in public office, sacrificing some of their private life in the name of civic responsibility. The modern view of citizenship focuses more on rights -- citizens have a right to vote and otherwise participate in public service, but also to place private concerns ahead of obligations to their community.

Scholars from across the political spectrum have identified a corresponding shift in the hierarchy of shared American values. The common good, sacrifice and self-restraint have given way to self-expression and individual fulfillment as shared values.

Some attribute the disintegration of American society -- and everything from divorce to juvenile crime -- on the high value our society places on individualism, self-realization and personal choice. The New York Times recently published a survey in which respondents placed the highest priority on personal responsibility, self-sufficiency and self-expression. While the survey found that much of the public laments selfishness, respondents didn't make a connection between putting one's own interest above others and weakened community ties.

This tension between individualism and the common good is illustrated vividly in the way middle-class and affluent Baltimoreans decide which schools their children should attend.

As a parent of four children enrolled in private and public schools, I have participated regularly in conversations about school choices. Is one private school too structured or another too informal? What are the pros and cons of single-sex education? Is there enough, or too much, emphasis on the arts or athletics?

But in such discussions with other parents, the question of whether we, as citizens, have an obligation to consider public school has rarely emerged. It is reasonable to put our children's needs first. But our failure to recognize that every family's decision makes a difference to the larger community is disturbing.

The ethic among baby boomers, who once celebrated community and shared concerns, now seems to celebrate obligation to ourselves -- or, by extension, to our children. Not all families who elect private schools are looking just for a vehicle for their children's self-fulfillment. It simply hasn't occurred to many whose families have attended the same schools for generations to think about the possibility of public schools.

For those who care about the fate of the public schools, their concerns are outweighed by the perception that city schools won't adequately educate their children. Besides, they assume that sending their children to a city school would not help to change a system with such widespread problems. But such individual decisions matter.

Each child placed in a private school costs the public schools parents who have energy, time and money to help improve the schools. Even a handful of families with bright children and resources can transform a school and affect, at least in a small way, the system that serves the school.

I would never argue that the few "jewels" in an otherwise endangered public school system are perfect. Art and music teachers are spread too thin, there is too little physical education, and the cafeterias and computer labs can't compare with facilities at private schools.

Good citizenship doesn't require unqualified commitment to public schools. But I think it requires factoring in how our individual school choices affect the larger community. Bright kids flourish in many environments. In the city schools, the trade off for less individual attention may well be development of leadership skills and a stronger sense of commitment to school and community.

Groups, such as the Abell Foundation, which understand that keeping the middle-class in the public schools will help revive the city, have helped support programs that celebrate excellence and enable bright kids to know how important their presence is in the city's schools.

Parents should remember that even the most ideal private school may encourage in some children a sense of privilege and complacency that can impede their intellectual promise and full development.

More middle-class families should explore the public schools. Their involvement there is our best hope for developing a new generation of citizens that has a broader understanding of community and the connection between privilege and responsibility.

Jane Murphy is a professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law.

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