

Going Private

When public school started to “borrow” Teen Boy’s brain cells, it was time to do the unthinkable.

If you made a list of People Least Likely to Send Their Children to Private School, I wouldn’t be at the very tippy top, since Fidel and Che would have those spots sewn up. But I would be close. I grew up believing that private school—unless it was Catholic, in which case you had to go or your parents would burn in hell for all eternity—was a highly suspicious Yankee affectation. Private school was for the spawn of robber barons with names like Chauncey and Chatsworth, Whitney and Morgan.

A superior public school system, I believed—and still believe—is the foundation of democracy and the only way to make sure that the person doling out my meds at the Shady Rest Nursing Home will be able to read. But something happened to make me abandon my principles. Something that, had I learned to write from Bridget Jones’s Diary, might have read a little like this:

*Hormonal lunacy takes hold at same instant as pregnancy. Insist we must buy house in neighborhood that, according to TAAS scores, has best public elementary school in district.

*Snap out of it after move long enough to recall that Baby Man won’t be attending public school for a while. Have contract to write novel. Must work. Endure several years of babysitters who range from competent to psychotic.

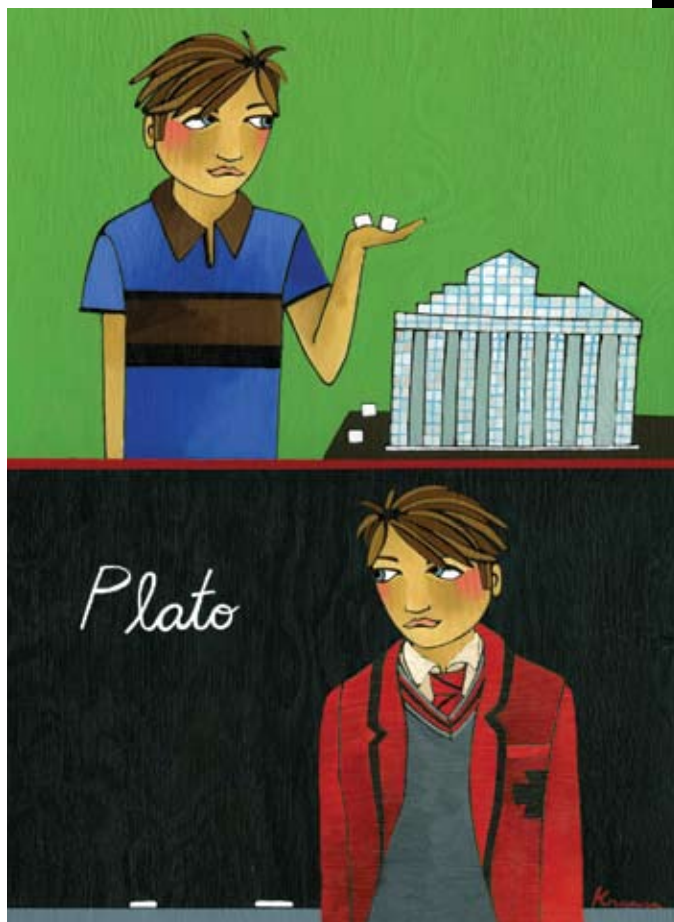
*Search for preschool and find the market cannily cornered by organized religion. Preference and discounts for church members. One “principal” shows me “Jesus Room” and brags about “curriculum.” Had thought potty training might be large enough challenge.

*Enroll at Mother’s Morning Out run by Presbyterians. Consider Prezes safely ecumenical until another mother tells me that Catholic Church is “the whore of Babylon.” Word spreads that I am author of several “anti-Christian” books. Baby Man ostracized.

*Switch to preschool operated by Church of the Old Hippie. No Jesus Room or curriculum. Lots of wild dancing to Motown’s greatest hits and back rubs at nap time. Tuition roughly what I had figured college would cost.

*Enter “best public elementary school in district.” Tuition ends; college fund starts. Kindergarten teacher named Mrs. Olsen. In astute early character analysis, Baby Man calls her Mrs. Wholesome. Less thrilled to discover class is in a “portable.” Had I wanted my child to spend his days broiling in a double-wide, would have married Bobby Wayne DuPree and had passel o’ young’uns.

*First-grade teacher dramatically less cuddly. While helping with student art projects, am instructed to redo all Paper Plate Snowmen: Must reapply carrot noses in anatomically correct fashion.



Begin to understand uniformity and excellence of all “student” projects. Notice that display of fifth-graders’ Greek projects includes sugar cube models of Parthenon that would test architectural skills of I. M. Pei.

*Highlight of second grade is Japanese Garden project. Baby Man works for weeks on adorable tiny clay figures, little curved bridge. Is crushed when project not selected for display in hall. Notice that many displayed projects still carry price tags from floral shop.

*El Hubbo, the Hub of My Universe, waylaid in deserted hallway by teacher responsible for large den-

SUGAR SUBSTITUTE: No more Parthenons—or contributions to the college fund.

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tal bill. Considers asking if she could control class with something other than Warheads candy. (Warheads: not just sugar—sugar with two kinds of tooth-dissolving acid.) Before Warheads issue broached, teacher thrusts prodigious bosom in El Hubbo's face and asks if he'd like to "pet it." Horror-induced blindness passes and El Hubbo sees sugar glider squirrel peeking out of breast pocket. Wisely declines invitation to pet.

*Legendary principal quits, takes cream of teaching crop to new school. Disgruntled, uncherry-picked teachers drive off two subsequent principals. Morale plummets.

*In parent-teacher meeting, head of math department boasts that third-graders are doing algebra. I ask when multiplication tables will be addressed. Moment of silence. Am informed that such mindless, unfashionable "drill and kill" tasks are parent responsibilities.

*Make several discoveries: (1) Junior high school now called "middle school." Common wisdom is that grades six, seven, and eight are lost cause. Best parents can hope for is that child will emerge alive and unaddicted. (2) Student must be in top 10 percent of class to get into University of Texas, the school we'd blithely considered our sure thing. (3) Astute

analysis of TAAS scores reveals that "best" school in district actually does no better in math than school in El Paso where English is second language. High scores in reading due to upper-middle-class children's having been read to in utero.

*Toward end of fourth grade, Baby Man still not doing what was once called "borrowing" in subtraction, now known as "regrouping." Regroup with teacher who says this is "grade-wide" problem but that everyone will be "up to speed" before year is out. Two weeks before school ends, it is announced that fourth-graders are exhausted from taking TAAS test. Rest of year devoted to early American crafts. Baby Man gets good at stamping tin but still can't borrow.

*Decide tin stamping excellent preparation for making license plates in prison; other careers might require ability to subtract. Contemplate switch to private school. Must collect grade reports from teachers to apply. Happy duty, since genius child is straight-A student. Peek at teachers' grade books and recall moment in *The Shining* when Shelley Duvall finally sees Jack Nicholson's "manuscript," discovers hundreds of pages filled with "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Grade books covered with A's, two or three B's. Can all students be geniuses?

*Switch to private school. Ha! Don't have to construct sugar cube Parthenon. But saving for college out of question. Remind self that college is immaterial for applicant who can't subtract. Strip Mall Prep is miraculous (nicknamed for affordable price and location in old house near electrolysis parlor and junk store). No library, no gym, no cafeteria, no tax base, no institutional support—only great teachers. Baby Man becomes Teen Boy, has best years of education.

*Neighborhood high school rated "exemplary." Teachers inspirational. Whew! Back to public school. Restart college fund.

*By sophomore year, secret of exemplary high school has leaked out. Flood of transfers. Already-crowded school overwhelmed. Several teachers problematic. Teen Boy learns much more about one teacher's belief that Asians are taking over school system than he does about subject. Grades, morale, motivation plummet.

*Back to private school. College fund impossible dream. Writing giant checks puts self in very grumpy mood. Rethink stance on tin stamping. Consider how educating one child has strained two fully employed parents with decades of experience in working the system. Wonder about Bobby Wayne DuPrees of the world. Worry about young'un of Texas. ♣

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