



## There's No Such Thing as a "Public" School

By Jason Bedrick

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Perhaps the most pervasive myth about our nation's education system is the notion that "public schools have to take all children." Last year, when criticizing charter schools that she claimed, "don't take the hardest-to-teach kids," Hillary Clinton quipped, "And so the public schools are often in a no-win situation, because they do, thankfully, take everybody." In fact, they do not. At best, so-called "public" schools have to take all children *in a particular geographic area*, although they can (and do) expel children based on their behavior. They are more appropriately termed "district schools" because they serve residents of a particular district, not the public at large. Privately owned shopping malls are more "public" than district schools.

This wouldn't be a serious problem if every district school offered a quality education but, in fact, they do not. Rather, the quality of education that the district schools provide tends to be highly correlated with the income levels of the residents of those districts. As Lindsey Burke of the Heritage Foundation and I noted last year, our housing-based system of allocating education leads to severe inequities:

There is a strong correlation between these housing prices and school performance. In nearly all D.C. neighborhoods where the median three-bedroom home costs \$460,000 or less, the percentage of students at the zoned public school scoring proficient or advanced in reading was less than 45 percent. Children from families that could only afford homes under \$300,000 are almost entirely assigned to the worst-performing schools in the District, in which math and reading proficiency rates are in the teens.

Not surprisingly, some parents feel desperate when their kids are trapped in subpar schools because they can't afford to live in ritzy neighborhoods or pay private school tuition. And some of those desperate parents will provide fake addresses to get their children a better education.

In Florida, the Broward County School Board announced last week that it is hiring private investigators to spy on the addresses the school suspects of being fake. As the Sun-Sentinel reports, the private eyes will "monitor a home and then give school officials photographs, videos, and a detailed report."

Fraudulent registration has long been an issue. Parents, believing their child will get a better education at a school outside their assigned boundary, list a relative or friend's address, provide a fake address or even rent an empty apartment in the area of a preferred school.

Doing so can in Broward be prosecuted as a third-degree felony, since parents declare their addresses under penalty of perjury.

It's unlikely that the district will have the funds to hire private eyes to track every student. One wonders, then, what criteria the district schools will use to determine which students should be surveilled... will they start with students who, shall we say, don't look like most of the other students in that high-income district?

Broward County is far from unique. Parents nationwide are regularly fined and even imprisoned for stealing a better education for their children. One New Jersey town even offered \$100 bounties for information leading to the expulsion of students whose parents lied about their addresses.

Writing at RedefinED, Nia Nuñez-Brady explained why her parents provided a fake address to get her into a better – and safer – district school:

One day, while I was using the ladies room, another girl, who was double my size or at least it felt that way at the time, threatened to bash my head on the wall if I didn't stop hanging out with a guy she liked. Growing up, my dad always told me, "Your face is too pretty to get into a fight." So, I said to her: "Please don't hit me. I'll stay out of your way."

She laughed. I went back to class, and tried to focus.

The next day, while walking on the hallway at the school, this same girl grabbed another student close to me. She pushed her against the wall and instigated a fight. The difference between myself and this new student: This girl fought back. The bully wasted no time. She grabbed her Snapple bottle, broke it on the wall, and used a piece of glass to slash the student's face.

I was petrified. That could have been me.

Nia begged her parents to change schools but they couldn't afford it. They were recent immigrants with little money. But they couldn't bear to keep their daughter in a school where they feared for her safety. So they lied.

[M]y parents did something thousands of other public-school parents feel forced to do, because they feel they have no other options. They lied about where we lived so I could go to a different school where I would feel safe.

Of course, it is understandable residents of districts who have paid taxes into the system would be upset that they are subsidizing the education of children whose parents haven't paid into the system. And so it's also understandable that the district schools would seek to exclude students whose parents haven't paid into the system, just as private schools shouldn't be expected to educate a child whose parents hadn't paid tuition. As Nia explains, problem is the system itself:

I understand that perjury is against the law, and that the law should be respected. But from my own experience, I know the parents who lie about their address are often the ones with limited resources, the ones who cannot afford to move to a more affluent neighborhood, the ones who can least afford to pay a fine or fight a felony charge.

I can also understand the families who have been kicked out of a school close to where they live, because the school is overcrowded with students from other neighborhoods. That, too, is unfair.

But that's the problem. The system is unfair.

Indeed. Getting a decent education should not depend upon the ability of one's parents to afford an expensive home. It is long past time that we break the link between home prices and school quality. Doing so entails recognizing that there's no such thing as a "public" school.