

Why Public Schools¹

By Meredith Sue Willis

I grew up in a small Appalachian town where two-thirds of my graduating class did not go on to college. There is nothing in my education that I value more than that high school experience. I learned to see myself as one part of a diverse world, and I assumed that this public school experience was one that everyone sought.

Many years later, in Brooklyn, New York, I was shocked to hear people making plans for how to manipulate the system to get their children out of the local schools. One reason I moved to the suburbs was so that I could avoid such a dilemma. And yet, in the suburbs, I met people who treated school as a consumer product. Should I, too, go shopping? What did the South Orange-Maplewood public schools have to offer my child? What is valued in this school district, and what values would it teach my son?

Clearly, the South Orange-Maplewood school district offers an excellent academic program. More than a third of the seventh graders from South Orange Middle School alone were invited by Johns Hopkins University to take the SATs last year because they scored in at least the 97th percentile in a standardized test. Our high school always has large numbers of Merit scholar semi-finalists and is among the three or four highest ranking schools in New

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Jersey when it comes to numbers of Advanced Placement Classes. We have broad and diverse opportunities for our students: free instrumental and vocal training; clubs of so many varieties that the head spins; a choice of sports that includes fencing, lacrosse, ultimate frisbee, track, field hockey– and many, many more.

This demonstrates not only the resources of our community but also a commitment to well-rounded students and to the development of many kinds of talent. All school districts of a certain size, of course, can claim wide opportunities and a commitment to developing the potential in their students. But what values other than academic focus and the development of various talents do our public schools offer?

The unique quality of a public school is that, by its very existence, it professes the profoundly democratic claim that *all children are our children*. We pool our resources to educate our children: the ones taking the advanced placement courses at Columbia High School and getting acceptances at Princeton, Brown, and Yale as well as the ones who need special tutoring from community volunteers. Our children are the ones whose families are musicians and professors as well as the ones who come from homes where learning is seen primarily as a means to a decent job. Our children are the ones who don't speak English at home as well as the ones whose families have lived in Maplewood and South Orange for generations. All of these children are our children. As a community, whether we are parents, grandparents, or people with no children of our own, we are engaged in this project of educating the future generation together.

We are required by law to open the doors of our schools to everyone, whether or not they are prepared, well-motivated, or well-behaved. But more important than this legal fact is the value that underlies it – the value that is taught implicitly by our schools. Public schools were created to encourage and maintain what we have in common. Public schools were established to create a community that struggles to define its own future.

Most American schools give lip service to this, but in South Orange and Maplewood we have a rare and wonderful opportunity to create a world class school system that is not based on homogeneity of race and ethnic group. We have true diversity and the human resources to build a culture of learning and a community of people who live with democracy as an organic part of their daily life.