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## **The Diverse Schools Dilemma**

A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools

*Michael J. Petrilli*

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*For Meghan*

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## Introduction

Heather Schoell, a white, college-educated, stay-at-home mom living in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Washington, D.C., was incredulous when a friend suggested that she should send her daughter to the local public school. “Honestly, I was like, ‘Right, D.C. Public Schools—we’re not even looking at that,’” Schoell recalled later.<sup>1</sup> Maury Elementary The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent’s Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools wasn’t much to look at; its drab 1960s-era building had opaque, yellowing windows that made the place feel desolate. One hundred percent of its students were African American, most of them from low-income families. Schoell pictured mayhem behind those dreary windows, poor kids just running around. But her friend, who had volunteered at the school for twenty-five years, continued to press her, saying, “Give it a chance, go inside and see.”

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So she did, when her daughter was two and a half. And what she saw wasn't at all what she'd imagined. The principal at the time, a military veteran, exuded a confidence that put many of Schoell's concerns to rest. The school was disciplined, teachers had high expectations for students, and the administration was eager to welcome new students.

Schoell was relieved to find that the school might be a real possibility. She and her husband couldn't afford private school. And the couple, both raised in rural communities, refused to decamp to the suburbs. "We chose to come to D.C. because it was pretty much the antithesis of where we grew up," she said. "We want our kids to have the benefits of everything that the city has to offer."

Around the same time Schoell visited Maury, in 2005, a group of mostly white parents was pushing the school system to start a preschool program there for three-year-old children. Capitol Hill was experiencing a baby boom, and there The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools weren't enough spots at local preschools to go around. A city councilman got involved, and by the fall a publicly funded program for three-year-olds was off the ground.

This was The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools the beginning of a transformation at Maury, starting with its youngest students. Whereas the upper grades at the school had just one classroom apiece—all of which were 100 percent black—within a few years The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools the three-year-old program The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools had four classrooms that were racially and socioeconomically mixed. Maury is now an integrated school, to the pleasure, Schoell says, of everyone involved.

Maury's hopeful story is part of a larger trend. In the middle of the last decade, in urban communities across America, middle-class and upper-middle-class parents started sending their children to public schools again—schools that for decades had served overwhelmingly poor and minority populations. From Schoell's Washington neighborhood to northwest Denver, to Brooklyn, and beyond, white families in particular have come back to local schools—not in dribs and drabs but in droves. In one D.C. high school, students sarcastically called it "the Caucasian invasion."

One big reason for the shift has been gyrations in the housing market. As prices rose dramatically in the 1990s and the early 2000s, up-and-coming neighborhoods that young families might have previously avoided now stood as their best chance for affordable urban housing. (Thanks to the sharp drop in crime, these neighborhoods were safer than ever before, too.) Many of these folks, progressive-minded members of the "creative class" that Richard Florida made famous, chose urban or close-in suburban communities full of art galleries, trendy coffee shops . . . and lousy schools.<sup>2</sup>

When the market crashed, lots of these young parents found themselves underwater on their starter homes and frozen in place. Even those with equity realized that, with tighter credit and tougher lending guidelines, they couldn't afford to move anywhere much more expensive, and

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they were forced to start thinking about *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* making their urban lives work for the long term. Plenty had come to love living in cities and, like Heather Schoell, refused to make the trek to the bland 'burbs. Unable to afford going private, they had to contemplate their local public schools.

My wife and I can relate. After we married and started thinking of having a baby, we sought a suitable, stroller-friendly neighborhood in or around Washington, D.C. It couldn't be too expensive; at the time I worked for the government, and my wife was soon to become a stay-at-home mom. I insisted on a *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* house with a yard, but neither of us wanted to move far from the city. That's where we worked and played, and a bikeable commute downtown was a must. Early in our home search we stumbled across Takoma Park, Maryland, a diverse community adjacent to D.C. that's renowned for its crunchy, hippy vibe. (It's often called "the People's Republic" or "Berkeley East.") We fell in love with the bungalows and Victorians and the lush tree canopy, and found ourselves amused by the organic food co-op, the folk festival, the strident political activism, and the earnest environmentalism. We found an adorable (read: very small) 1920s cottage bungalow on a street packed with little kids, and bought in.

When our first son was born, we came to appreciate Takoma Park even more. Like other inner suburbs and leafy city neighborhoods we know, it's toddler heaven. Partly that's *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* because of the plentiful parks. But mostly it's because of the easy walks. We could stroll to *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* the library for story time, to friends' homes for playtime, to the local co-op to pick up milk, to the Sunday farmer's market, or to the Metro station to visit downtown museums. There was a real sense of community—a rarity in so much of modern America.

Still, we weren't sure we wanted to stay in Takoma Park for the long term. *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* Mainly, we were concerned about its schools. They have a mixed reputation and lackluster test scores, largely due to their diverse population of students. (Research has long shown that poor and minority students tend to perform worse on standardized tests than affluent white children.<sup>3</sup>) At our local elementary school, white students were a minority, and one-third of the kids were poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* from the federal government.

We very much liked the idea of our son becoming friends with kids from other races and backgrounds, and we didn't think we could afford private *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* school. But we expected that our boy would be entering kindergarten with the basics—and more—under his belt, and we worried he wouldn't get the attention and challenge he needed. What if his teachers were focused on helping recent immigrant children learn English, or giving low-income kids remedial help? What if the schools were test-prep factories, obsessed only with getting students to basic proficiency in reading and math? After six years in our Takoma Park house, with our older son reaching preschool *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* age and his little brother on the way, we started wondering if we should move again, to

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a more affluent, less diverse suburb like Bethesda, Maryland, where these sorts of issues wouldn't be a factor.

If we knew that our kids would do just as well in a diverse school in Takoma Park and be just as safe, *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* we'd stay, no question. We would have it all: a great education in an environment that reflects the world they are *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* going to live in.

On the other hand, if there was clear evidence that our kids would do better in homogeneous schools, there would be no question either. None of us would knowingly put our children in harm's way, or curtail their opportunities to learn. Just as we wouldn't move our family into a dangerous housing project to promote the cause of social justice, we wouldn't *The Diverse Schools Dilemma: A Parent's Guide to Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools* send our children to a school with kids from that same project if we thought we were risking their safety.

This book will argue that the truth is somewhere in between. While there are clear benefits for affluent students who attend diverse schools, there are also clear risks. The question that each of us must answer for ourselves is whether the former outweigh the latter.

## **The Diverse Schools Dilemma A Parent S Guide To Socioeconomically Mixed Public Schools**

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