

# UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL CHOICE

## A Rejoinder to the News Press Series on “Our Segregated Schools”

Robert C. Noël, Ph.D.

For five days in April, the front pages of the News Press carried a series of articles entitled “Our Segregated Schools.” The series advanced the thesis that “white flight” is what produces segregated schools—that families who exercise school choice do so on the basis of race. The series gave little credence to an alternative view that frames school choice in terms of educational quality. It ignored differences among local schools in terms of achievement indicators. It was all but silent about local successes in raising achievement. It did not cite successful models that have inspired recent reforms. And it did not consider a future in which academic achievement is high at all Santa Barbara schools. Given these and other short-comings, the News Press series did not meet the burden of evidence commensurate with its charge of racism.

### The method is the message

It was known months prior that the News Press was doing an investigative report on “white flight.” In choosing “white flight” as the main organizing framework, the questions asked in interviews, the quotations selected and the overall message of the series were predetermined. ‘Race drives choice.’ In words attributed to two school principals:

“It’s perception, and lots of racism.” ... “People come up with all kinds of explanations. But the real reason is too many brown faces.”

Do these statements reflect the views of two educators with outstanding records? Or, were these quotations reflections of the way the story was framed? This is a legitimate question, because the two principals claim that they were quoted out of context and that such statements do not reflect their beliefs. Interpretative differences between a reporter and her sources cannot be resolved here. But, the fact that two pivotal quotations are in dispute is important. It is known at the News Press, and the public should have been informed about it.

*Bob: This section was found objectionable by folks in the SBNP newsroom. Rather than quarrel, I took it out and wrote a new introductory para.*

*Bob*

The series was an investigative report. Investigative journalism, with its penchant for ferreting out wrong-doers, has a grand tradition in America. But what if there is little wrong-doing? What if most parents are simply doing what is right for their kids? It is possible that many of the materials gathered in support of the “white flight” thesis could be artifacts of the investigative method. Many newspapers commission professional surveys. When the subject is as potentially divisive as race, there is a lot to be said for the more rigorous methods of survey research.

### An alternative frame: choice according to quality

The News Press series included no serious consideration of evidence of school quality. Yet, for countless families of all colors, educational quality is a major consideration in buying a home and/or choosing a school. All parents want the best for their children. What would one see by looking at school choice through the prism of educational quality? What if parents had been presented with the following hypothetical school choices?

‘Please examine the adjacent charts. Which would you prefer for your child: School A or a School B?’

CHARTS HERE

As the chart shows, School A’s educational quality indicators are well below the national average; the vast majority of students are at or below grade level; and relatively few students score among the top 25-percent in reference to a national sample. Typically at School A, only one or two students per class are high-achievers (in the top 15-percent in reference to the national sample). Some classes have none.

At School B, the scores for “the average student” are much higher. Substantial proportions of students are above grade level and in the top 25-percent. B is a relatively high-performing school. It is hard to believe that this information would not spark interest in School B. To be sure, parents would want to consider other characteristics of the schools. But differences in the quality factor would weigh heavily in the equation for most, regardless of their ethnicity.

What if a third school were added to the matrix— School C? Here is a high-performing school. NCE 64 means that the school’s “average student” ranks at the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile in reference to a national sample of students. Nearly half of the student body scored among the top 25-percent in reference to that sample; there is a substantial middle; and only about 25-percent of the student body are in the bottom quartile.

Of course, parents would still want to take other factors into account. For example, some parents might consider academic achievement sufficiently high at both B and C to allow them to choose on the basis of school philosophy. Nonetheless, the addition of School C shifts the factor weights, making it much more difficult, for example, to give serious consideration to low-performing School A.

Although they are improving, Santa Barbara still has low-performing schools that look like School A. Significant numbers of families residing within their attendance areas choose not to send their children to them, and a substantial proportion of those parents are white.

Santa Barbara also has relatively high-performing schools similar to School B. They are often “flight” destinations. Interestingly, however, Santa Barbara’s B-category schools also fail to attract and hold all of the children in their respective neighborhoods.

Santa Barbara does not have a high-performing school like School C. Neighboring school districts do. Many Santa Barbara families (from both A and B-type schools) transfer to C-type schools in neighboring districts.

Many factors come into play in a family’s choice of a school. For some people, no doubt, ethno-linguistic mix is one of them. Different families combine these factors differently. A great many parents possess information more or less equivalent to what I have summarized in these charts. They have it, and they take it heavily into account. Clearly, the picture of school choice looks quite different when it is framed as quality-based decision making.

What is the evidence for the validity of one frame or the other? The News Press series did not deal with this question, and validity may be an unattainable standard. The value of looking at the picture in alternative frames is that each highlights some of the limitations and biases of the other. It is not easy to develop a self-conscious awareness of the assumptions and values that shape one’s view of the world. That is one of the functions of criticism.

### **School performance and school demographics**

Under-performing schools tend to be the sources of “flight.” Understanding school choice entails grappling with some of the systemic complexity that produces and reproduces under-performing schools. Here are some widely accepted research findings related to under-performing schools.

- Children from low income families tend to have less success in school than children from middle and upper income families.
- Children whose parents did not finish high school tend to have less success in school than children whose parents graduated from high school and went to college.
- Latino and African American children disproportionately come from low income families whose parents did not finish high school or go to college.

Research does not say that ability is determined by demographics. These findings are about success in school. “Opportunities to learn” stand between ability and success. Despite the best efforts of policy makers and educators, opportunities to learn remain less available to poor children of color in America. Something like this constitutes the prevailing understanding of academic performance in the educational profession. No one is happy about this. But it is considered to be based on solid science.

However, it is but a short, slippery step from explaining lack of success in terms of demographics to expecting lack of success according to demographics. Here is the logic.

‘Poor children of color may have caring and supportive parents. But they are educationally disadvantaged. Their lives lack most of the tangible and intangible resources that contribute to academic success. It is unrealistic to expect schools where most students are disadvantaged to perform at levels comparable to schools where children have all the advantages.’

This line of reasoning starts from research and ends with two sets of expectations, one low, one high.

The problem is that low expectations begat low performance. They are self-fulfilling prophecies. It is bad educational practice to expect less. It gets less. Such irony! Good science seems to have become a rationalization for bad practice.

Low expectations have been institutionalized in public education. The State of California ranks schools according to indicators of academic performance. In so doing, it emphasizes comparisons among demographically “similar schools.” Schools that are populated mostly by poor children of color should be judged only in comparison to other schools whose students are predominantly poor children of color. In effect this says to schools: ‘As long as the job you are doing is relatively good, it is OK if it is absolutely bad.’

This is demographic relativism. It is a balm for beleaguered bureaucrats, an aphrodisiac for apologists and a Teflon shield for politicians.

### **High flyers**

The exciting news is that growing numbers of schools are defying the demographic odds. The Education Trust calls them “high flyers” ([www.edtrust.org](http://www.edtrust.org)). Many of these schools are located in impoverished inner-cities, and all of them have highly disadvantaged student populations. Their demographic profiles point to low achievement. But their track records are a joy to behold. High flyers reject the dual standard of demographic relativism. They expect more, and they get more.

The schools underlying Charts B and C are high flyers. School B looks very much like Santa Barbara’s best. It looks even better in terms of some indicators. But it is not in Santa Barbara’s Upper East, or in San Roque or on the Mesa. In fact, it is surrounded by urban blight. Its neighborhood is replete with barred windows and razor-wire fences. It is not a cozy little school. It is jammed with 850 children. All are poor; 54-percent are Latino; 32-percent are English Language Learners; and 43-percent are African American. Twenty-eight percent of the parents did not finish high school; only 11-percent graduated from college. Thirty-eight percent of the teachers are not fully credentialed. School B is Kelso Elementary, in Inglewood, California.

School C is Greenville Fundamental School in Santa Ana, California. Here are Greenville’s demographics. Seventy-two percent of its 964 students are Latino— mostly blue-collar Latinos. Eleven percent are the children of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. Only 13-percent are white. A third of the students are in the Free or Reduced-Price Lunch program. Twenty-four percent are English Language Learners. This last number would be higher were it not for the fact that Greenville is extraordinarily successful at teaching kids English in the very early grades. In terms of academic achievement, Greenville is in the Hope School District’s league. But, in terms of demographics, it is a world apart.

One does not hear similar-schools rationalizing at high flying schools. There are no class or race-based expectations. There is but one standard, and it is high.

### **Getting from here to there**

Let us assume that somehow all of Santa Barbara’s predominantly Latino schools are transformed overnight into high flyers. In the short-term, this would probably not lure back many who left, because most parents do not move their kids once they have settled into in a school.. In the short-term, the main effect would be that a lot more children would be getting a high-performance education in predominantly Latino schools. Not bad!

Now, let us project ahead a few years. Public perception has caught up with educational reality. Young families are looking over educational options for children about to enter school. The school in their attendance area is predominantly Latino, and it is a high flyer.

Will this attract neighborhood families to the school? Again, perhaps not. But the underlying dynamics of “flight” are reversed. A few families come. Their presence attracts more. That in turn attracts still more. It snowballs. In short, give them excellence, and they will come.

**Solutions**

I suggest that something like this scenario is how we get from here to there. It is a win-win outcome. All kids are in high flying schools, and more families of all colors stay in their neighborhood schools.

There is movement from here to there in Santa Barbara. The early reading program that was put into place with the generous support of the David and Lucille Packard Foundation is now showing significant results. Our schools are improving. Adams and Harding— the two that were singled out in the News Press series— are improving by leaps and bounds. For kids who missed the early literacy program, remedial programs are being implemented in the upper grades.

Improving educational quality and closing the achievement gap are top priorities for educational leadership, from school principals to Superintendent Flores. My School Board colleagues, Ruth Green, Nancy Harter, Fred Rifkin and Claire Van Blaricum, are all are fully commitment to educational improvement. The district is incorporating features from successful models in Inglewood and in Texas.

Most importantly, the community is served by a dedicated corps of teachers who daily go “above and beyond” for kids in the classroom. It is they who must lead our children from here to there. It is they who feel the pain of “flight.” Yet they persevere.

At no time in the past decade has there been a clearer picture of what remains to be done for school improvement. It is nitty-gritty stuff: changes in school micro-structures, frequent assessments and feedback, individualized growth targets, etc. Many of the elements are in place, but there has to be better system integration. My biggest fear is that the heat generated by the News Press series will divert us from such tasks.

Uniformly excellent schools are our best hope. In them, all of Santa Barbara’s children can soar.

*Robert C. Noël is a member of the Santa Barbara School Board and Emeritus Professor in Political Science at UCSB.*