

Southern Alternative Schools: A Portrait

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THE term "alternative school" has been used in many contexts since it became popular several years ago. Because of this popularity, the term has somewhat different meanings in various sections of the country. For well over 400,000 school age children and their parents in 11 Southern states,¹ an "alternative school" has come to mean an independent private school which provides an alternative to the now heavily integrated public schools in their communities.

While most of us carry a stereotype around in our heads about these schools, little is actually known about their operations and programs, and even less is known about the parents who support them. This paper reports some preliminary findings of a study² which looked at the forces behind the founding of these new independent schools, and the motivations and expectations of the parents who send their children to them.

The Study

The subject of the study was 60 new independent schools scattered throughout the state of Florida with a combined pupil

¹ See: Reese Cleghorn, "The Old South Tries Again." *Saturday Review* 53 (20): 76-77+; May 16, 1970.

² Preliminary data from a dissertation study at the University of Florida by the author.

population of nearly 35,000 students and 200 sets of parents representing 25 of the 60 schools. The study did not seek to provide a representative sample of all such schools in Florida or the South, but rather attempted an exploratory probe into a subject area virtually void of data or documentation due to its novelty.

All of the schools included in the study were new, having been founded since 1965, and were independent of any system or network of schools such as exists in the Catholic school program. The schools generally reflected local initiative in being established. The study used an open-ended self report questionnaire in obtaining its answers from both the schools and the parents supporting them.

The Findings

Schools. More than half of the 60 schools studied were less than four school years old, reflecting the speed with which the new independent school movement has come into the state of Florida. Enrollments at the schools studied ranged from 10 pupils to over 2,000 pupils. Most of the schools

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had less than 200 students in attendance. The average teacher-pupil ratio at the schools was 1:18.5, exclusive of substantial part-time help.

Slightly more than one-half of the schools surveyed reported that they were located on permanent campuses. The remainder of the schools were located in church buildings, in temporary facilities, or in private residences. All but one of the 60 schools studied were financed primarily through tuition, and the tuitions ranged from \$270 to \$6,000 per school year. Average tuition for the schools studied was \$611 per year, or roughly \$68 dollars per month per student for a nine-month program. The schools were asked five questions which dealt with their establishment, purpose, programs, and problems.

The first question asked of the schools was, "Why was your school established?" The greatest single response to this question made reference to a desire to provide Christian teaching in the schools (21). This is not nearly as surprising as it initially seems, since about one-third of all new independent schools in Florida have been organized through church bodies. Other common responses given for establishing such schools were "to provide quality education" (15), "to provide for the other-than-average child" (6), and "to promote an experimental program" (4).

When the schools were asked to "describe the curriculums," 27 of the 58 schools answering the question described their curriculums as "general," while another 25 schools reported a "college prep" program. That 52 of 58 schools described a program which is parallel to that of the public schools is generally characteristic of the new independent schools. This duplication of programs is even carried to the use of identical textbooks when possible.

The third question asked was, "Are there features unique to your school which distinguish it from the public schools in your community?" Fifty-nine of the 60 schools replied "yes." Features mentioned most often by the schools as being unique were "small classes" (18), "Christian programs" (17),

"attention to individual differences" (12), and "discipline" (8).

When the schools were asked to "give the reasons most commonly expressed by parents for enrolling their children in the school," 56 of the 60 schools reported that the parents sought "better education for their children." Fifty-one schools made mention of "individual attention," and 42 replied "better teaching." Other common reasons for parents enrolling their children, according to the schools, were "for discipline" (34), "for religious training" (23), and "for a safer environment" (22). Only 12 schools felt that the parents might be coming to their schools "to escape integration."

The final question asked of these new independent schools was, "What is the largest problem confronting your school as it begins the 1971-72 school year?" The most common reply given was "facilities" (20). That "space" is the largest problem facing these schools probably reflects the fact that the private school movement in Florida is still on the upswing, and in many places demand still exceeds supply. The next most often expressed answer was "finances" (17). Other notable responses given by the schools were "transportation" (4), "finding adequate teachers" (3), "the range of abilities of students coming from the public schools" (3), "relations with parents" (3), and "being new" (2).

Of the 60 schools taking part in the school study, 39 indicated an interest in having the parents at their school participate in the second phase of the study. Twenty-five schools were selected from the 39 on the basis of location, size, purpose, and organization, and designated "participating schools." Questionnaires were then sent to 200 sets of parents at these 25 "participating schools." At the time of this writing, responses had been received from 110 of the 200 sets of parents surveyed.

Parents. It was found that the parents who send their children to new independent schools are, generally, what could be called "solid citizens" in their respective communities. Most were mature, with 84 percent

being in their thirties or forties. Seventy-seven percent of the fathers were either professionals or white collar workers.³ The average number of years of formal education these parents had received was also notable; the fathers had averaged 14.5 years of schooling, the mothers 13.7 years. Nearly two-thirds of the sets of parents were themselves the product of the public schools, and in only one case had both parents been educated in private schools.

One-fourth of the parents studied still had children attending the public schools, most in higher grades, and nearly three-fourths of the parents reported that their private schoolers had previously attended the public schools. Only three of the 76 children of parents reporting such information had attended private schools for more than three years. The parents were asked six major questions related to their concerns about schools, their motivations in sending their children to new independent schools, and the educational expectations they had of such schools.

The parents were first asked to name the major reasons why the public schools in their communities were felt inadequate for their child's educational needs. The most common reasons expressed by the parents were that the public schools in their communities were "overcrowded" (42), and "disrupted or lacking in discipline" (38). Thirty-seven sets of parents felt that the teachers in the public schools were "unqualified" or "undedicated." Thirty sets of parents replied that the academic programs of the public schools were "unchallenging." Twenty sets of parents mentioned the "integration of the schools" as a factor. Fifteen parents mentioned the restrictions on religious activities as cause.

The parents were then asked, "What was it that motivated you to select a private school for your child?" A variety of answers was given. The most common "motivation" expressed by the parents was "the desire for

discipline and order in the schools" or "to obtain a safer and calmer learning environment for the child" (31). Twenty-two sets of parents were motivated to "escape low academic standards in the public schools." Another 22 felt that by going to a private school the child could gain a "better quality" education. Other strong motivations were "to provide a Christian education for the child" (18), "to gain individual attention for the child" (16), "because of unqualified teachers in the public schools or to gain better teachers" (13), and "to escape integration" in their communities (13).

When the private school parents were asked what specifically had attracted them to the school their child was now attending, the most common responses centered around the quality of school leadership and the caliber of the teaching staff (31). Others were attracted to "the academic program of the school" (28), the "location and convenience of the school" (25), the "small classes and the attention the child would receive" (25), the "philosophy and atmosphere of the school" (23), and the "reputation of the school or the personal recommendations it had received" (23).

The parents were then questioned about programs or services they desired for their child in school which were not presently being provided by their new independent school. The new independent school parent placed a "cafeteria" and "better physical education programs" at the top of their "most wanted" list. Other services and programs wanted by the parents were "a band or musical program," "increased language opportunities," "better library facilities," "more art and drama," "home economics," and "a better equipped science lab."

When the parents were asked if there were disadvantages in sending their child to a new independent school, the greatest response made reference to the tuition-tax combination of financing such an education (42). The next most commonly mentioned disadvantage was the inconvenience of transporting the children to and from the schools (25). The third most often mentioned disadvantage of sending their children to such

³ Professional and white collar workers such as physicians, bankers, lawyers, managers, and professors as opposed to blue collar workers such as machinists, mechanics, or equipment operators.

schools was the "isolation of the children." The parents reported that their children had a very limited circle of friends due to the small enrollments of such schools, were somewhat cut off from neighborhood children, and were attending school with a population of children "too homogeneous" for their liking.

The final question asked the new independent school parents was, "Would you ever consider enrolling your child in the public schools of your community under any conditions?" Over three-quarters of the parents (78) responding to the question said "yes." Twenty-eight felt they would return their child to the public schools if the conditions they had mentioned were corrected or favorably improved. Twenty-three sets indicated that they would send their child to the public schools if they were unable to finance a private education or if such schools were unavailable to them. Only nine sets of parents of the 78 answering the questions affirmatively reported that they would return their child to the public schools should the private school prove to have a markedly inferior program.

Some Impressions

In sifting through the answers given by both the schools and the parents studied, in which most replies were unstructured and therefore direct and personal, some basic impressions about the new independent schools were gained. Four such impressions may aid in understanding how these schools serve as alternatives to the public schools for the parents involved.

An initial impression gained from the responses is that no single stereotype of the purposes or programs of such schools, such as "all these schools are racist," will hold up under scrutiny. While unquestionably some of the schools exist for specific purposes such as racial supremacy or class exclusiveness, most are general in their operation and philosophy and present a somewhat pale copy of the public school programs. It is essential not to overlook, too, the possibility that in some isolated cases these schools may

present the only real hope for a child to obtain a complete formal education free from disruption and retarding influences.

A second impression gleaned from the returns is that a fairly clear line of communication concerning the operation of such enterprises exists between the administrators of these schools and the parents who support them. The schools reported that parents wanted a better education for their child, more individual attention, reliable and qualified teachers, and safe and disciplined classrooms. The parents reported that they desired a higher quality educational program, with good teachers, in a safe disciplined environment, with greater individual attention for their child. Both the school administrators and the private school parents were in agreement that, at this time, the public schools are lacking in discipline, maintaining low academic standards, overcrowded, unsafe, staffed by some unqualified teachers, and unable to give the average or above average child the individual attention he or she should receive.

A third impression from the returns is that most of the parents seem to choose a new independent school for their children for a composite of reasons rather than for a single reason. It is probable, however, that the integration of the public schools in their communities has been the catalyst in their decision making. It is also probable that most of the faults they found with their local public schools are, to some degree, valid. In the minds of these parents, however, some problems found in the public schools today take on a special significance for their child.

A final impression of the new independent schools and the parents who support them is that, generally, these parents realize that they are often robbing Peter to pay Paul in their search for better schooling for their youngsters. While their private schools can indeed provide a safer, more familiar class-oriented environment where their child can receive a more academically directed program from more closely screened teaching personnel, there are also distinct and obvious disadvantages. Most of the new independent schools represent a financial

burden to the parents, isolate their child from the mainstream of life, are often terribly provincial, and are unquestionably lacking in all the "extras" which can only be provided by large-scale public school financing. The decision of a parent to send his child to such a school must often be that of choosing between two evils.

The problems posed by the "Southern alternative school" are staggering, particu-

larly as they relate to the operation of parallel public school programs. Until more is known about these new schools, they will continue to appear menacing to public school officials. It is quite obvious that stereotypes are not an adequate source of knowledge in understanding the new independent schools in the South. Thorough and open-minded inquiry into the meaning of these schools is badly needed. □

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