

**New Kids On the Block,  
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(no longer posted)

Ted Einstein and Deborah Hazel Johnson might once have been considered typical PTA members in Washington's suburban public schools. He's a physics professor at the University of Maryland. She's a psychologist. They live on a quiet, leafy street of brick homes in the Colesville area of Silver Spring, a neighborhood they chose because they wanted their two boys, David and Nathan, to attend the Montgomery County public schools.

"We heard the schools were excellent," Johnson says. "And it was very important to us that our kids get along with all sorts of people, that they feel that all people are equals."

Ingrid Duran lives a few miles away from Einstein and Johnson in an apartment in Takoma Park. A sign in the lobby warns that the police are authorized to act for the landlord. She dropped out of high school when the first of her three children was born.

She has something in common with Einstein and Johnson. She has high aspirations for her children: "I want them to complete school and go to college...I want them to be anything they want to be." And to help her children realize their dreams, she has turned to the same suburban school system chosen by Einstein and Johnson.

Can our public schools satisfy both families?

In the past decade schools in suburban Washington have been transformed from a province of the white middle class to a melting pot. In Prince George's County, the schools have an African-American majority. Three jurisdictions-Arlington, Alexandria and Montgomery County-are home to a diverse mix

in which no racial group predominates. The same will be true soon for Fairfax.

This demographic transformation challenges suburban schools in ways officials never imagined a couple of generations ago. They need to educate growing numbers of poor children and children who speak little or no English. At the same time they must hang on to the children of affluent families, who may be heading for private school in greater numbers.

The success, or failure, of these suburban schools will shape the future of the communities around them. Theirs is a test every bit as hard as the test racial integration put to urban schools decades ago-a test the cities in many ways failed.

Ingrid Duran began calling the Washington suburbs home in 1989, when she was 12. Her parents were immigrants from the Dominican Republic. They moved to a small but growing Latino community in Gaithersburg, where her mother had siblings. Ingrid enrolled in Watkins Mill High School.

She felt, she remembers, like a stranger. Duran is a petite, pretty, woman with light brown skin and curly brown hair. The kids at Watkins Mill were used to white faces and, to a lesser degree, black faces. She was neither. "They'd touch my hair and say, 'Is this your real hair?' " she recalls.

At 15, she got pregnant. Her conscience rebelled at the prospect of an abortion, and she gave birth to a son, Gabriel. She dropped out of school. She married Gabriel's father and had another child with him, Rebekah. Their marriage failed after a year.

Ingrid moved to Takoma Park. When she was 19, she met Curtis Boodoo, a 17-year-old from Trinidad who worked as a mechanic and liked to race cars. Ingrid had a third child, a brown-skinned, elfin girl she named Lystra "Lissy" Duran-Booodoo. Then she found that Curtis was seeing someone else and she ended the relationship.

Duran is a woman of both principle and ambition. Her objection to abortion led her to a job with a right-to-life group in Washington, where she works as a secretary, helping a staff lawyer draft model bills for state legislatures. She has gotten her high school equivalency diploma. There is a laptop computer in her small kitchen, which she uses to take online courses leading to certification as a paralegal. She has dreams of someday going to college and law school.

Duran tries hard to enrich her children's lives. Last summer she took Lyssy with her to Pittsburgh, where she was attending a right-to-life convention. But it's tough. She makes \$30,000 a year. She doesn't own a car. She can only dream of a house.

Duran's children could serve as the new face of public education in the Washington suburbs. With their mixed heritage, they represent three of the ethnic categories growing most rapidly in the student population-Hispanic, African-American and "multiracial."

The speed of this change is remarkable. Twenty years ago, white children comprised 73 percent of the Montgomery County's public school enrollment. By 2002, that number dropped to 47 percent. In the same period, the number of Hispanics has more than tripled, to 17 percent of the student population. African-Americans accounted for 21 percent of the students, Asian Americans for 14 percent-almost double their numbers of 20 years ago.

Montgomery, for years one of the nation's most affluent counties, is coming to grips with poverty. The number of Montgomery County children taking free and reduced-price meals, a federal program used as a gauge of poverty, has doubled from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. There are sub-districts around Wheaton, Takoma Park, and Silver Spring where more than half the students are eligible for assistance. The number of students enrolled in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) has tripled since 1983.

The impact of poverty and language barriers on student performance is significant. Over the past five years, Montgomery County students who had qualified for free or reduced-price lunches had an aggregate SAT score average that was 138 points lower than the average of students other students. Students who had been in an ESOL program had aggregate SAT averages 136 points lower those who had not.

Ted Einstein and Deborah Johnson sent their first child, David, to their neighborhood school, Cannon Road Elementary, 12 years ago, when these demographic trends were gathering momentum. Today, Cannon Road's profile matches the new demographic in the county-no ethnic group is in the majority.

Einstein and Johnson both identify themselves as liberal Democrats. They are both themselves products of public school educations. Their home is one in which learning and the arts are taken seriously. In their living room as we spoke there was a piano, a cello and a harpsichord.

They can afford trips and activities that enrich their boys' learning. Two summers ago, they went to Quebec. Last year it was England. The boys have gone to camps for everything from musical instruments to magic.

Both David, 18, and Nathan, 12, are bright. Though Einstein and Johnson appreciated the diversity of their public school, they worried that they were not being adequately challenged. David moved into more advanced math and reading groups, which made Johnson feel that the system was trying to meet his needs. David moved through a series of magnet programs for the academically talented until he reached the International Baccalaureate program at Springbrook High School, where he is a senior with a 4.0 grade point average. He has been admitted to Yale.

Nathan's experience was not as smooth. Johnson and Einstein began to feel that too many children came to school without the discipline or respect for learning that they had

tried to instill at home. "The teachers had to cope with a lot of behavioral issues," Johnson recalls. "Children talked out loud in class, or they wouldn't sit and concentrate, or they'd act out their frustration. It was very difficult with twenty-eight kids in a class."

Nathan occasionally reported that he had not had recess because his class had been collectively punished for the misbehavior of a few. That particularly bothered Johnson. "We haven't had to resort much to punishment in our family," she said. "I don't believe that punishment for an entire group works."

More worrisome was what they perceived as an effort by the school to shape the curriculum to accommodate weaker students. Johnson remembered fondly helping David with his research on special projects, like a report on a Maryland county.

Nathan didn't get such assignments. Johnson was told that the children in Nathan's class would do their research in groups; the school didn't think it was fair, the teacher explained, to expect kids from families with limited means to work on projects at home.

To Johnson, this was a symptom of a larger issue. Nathan's teachers seemed content to keep order and give the children routine worksheet assignments they could handle in school. She didn't feel Nathan was excited about learning. And because he was a quiet boy, she didn't feel he was getting much attention.

Two years ago, Johnson and Einstein decided to enroll Nathan in the Barrie School, a private school in Silver Spring, where his class size ranges from nine children to twenty and the teachers give the sorts of assignments that Johnson loves.

They are happy with Nathan's progress at Barrie, but they feel regret and guilt about leaving the public schools. "It was a decision we tried to avoid," Johnson says. "But you're not going to sacrifice your own kid to make a point about support for public education."

Precise statistics on the number of affluent families who are abandoning Washington's suburban public schools do not exist. Montgomery County says that in the 2000-2001 school year, more students entered the system from private schools than left for private schools.

But between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of school-age children in the county who are enrolled in the public schools dropped from 85 to 82 per cent. In 1990, there were some 18,700 county children in private schools or being home-schooled. In 2000, that number had grown to 29,439, an increase of 57 percent. (The growth of Montgomery County Public Schools enrollment in the same period was about 29 percent.) The Association of Independent Schools of Greater Washington (which does not represent most Catholic schools or proprietary schools) had 57 schools with 15,617 students in 1976. Last year it had 81 schools with 32,787 students. These numbers suggest that the suburban public schools may be maintaining their share of the market by capturing all of the children of families like Ingrid Duran's, while they lose a greater share of children from affluent families.

Anecdotal evidence of a movement to private schools abounds. I spoke with Larry Center, an attorney who is one of the leaders of a group called the Committee for Excellence at Richard Montgomery, the local high school in Rockville. "I know a number of parents who send their children to public elementary schools. But after elementary school they start sending them off to Bullis and Landon, or to Catholic schools," Center said.

Center invited me to a noontime rally his group had called in the parking lot outside Richard Montgomery, an event designed to drum up support for a new building. The 61-year-old school is overcrowded and outdated. The county plans to erect a new building for Richard Montgomery but says it cannot do so until 2007.

Private schools not far from Richard Montgomery—in Bethesda, Potomac, and Northwest Washington—all seem to have

money for new construction. To take one example among many, St. Andrews Episcopal School, which was founded in 1978 in a church basement on Massachusetts Avenue NW, in 1998 opened a 19-acre campus on Postoak Road in Potomac, housing 450 students in grades 6-12. It cost approximately \$13 million.

One of the speakers at the Richard Montgomery rally was Blair Ewing, a board of education and county council member in Montgomery County from the mid-1970s till last year. In an interview after the rally, Ewing said voter support of school spending had waned during his years in government. Then, many middle-class and affluent parents spoke out in favor of school appropriations.

"Now, though, the number of parents who are staying with us is declining some, and at a time when we need the help of every hard-driving and articulate parent we can get. Some parents are easily alarmed about school quality. It's regrettable," Ewing said.

In 1999, Montgomery County used a hefty compensation package to lure a new superintendent, Jerry Weast, from the schools in Guilford County, North Carolina. Born to a Kansas farmer, Weast is in his fifties, tall, with a hearty manner-the sort of man who could be successful selling insurance or building a church congregation.

Like many successful superintendents these days, Weast is a bit of a vagabond. He's been superintendent in several Kansas districts; in Great Falls, Mont.; in Durham County, N.C., and in Sioux Falls, S.D. More recently, he spent six years in Guilford County, where he developed a reputation as someone who can turn around a school system.

Weast knew Montgomery County's reputation as an elite, high-performance system-a reputation he also knew didn't reflect recent trends. But, he said in a recent interview, "I don't think either the board or I recognized the degree or intensity and rapidity of that change." The board, Weast says, was used to hearing

reports that dealt in system-wide averages. Those averages tended to mask the serious problems in certain schools.

Weast had a circumscribed set of options. Half a century ago, faced with demographic change in urban schools, the American middle class had responded by and large by turning its back and letting the city schools fend for themselves. The middle class moved to the suburbs, maintaining legal and political fences that kept suburban schools largely white and middle class.

Neither the board nor its new hire felt that it could turn its back on the problems. "Neglect," Weast says, "was not on my radar screen."

He assembled a program he sums up with the slogan "raising the bar and closing the gap." Weast's plan by and large leaves elementary school children in neighborhood schools. It aims to close the gap between high- and low-performing schools through an infusion of money, teacher training and special services in the areas with the highest concentrations of poverty and English-language problems. It also includes programs designed to appeal to high-achieving students and keep them in the schools. By the current budget year, weast had found \$67 million to fund the program.

One of the first beneficiaries of that money was Rolling Terrace, Lissy Duran-Boodoo's neighborhood school. Rolling Terrace has a lobby hung with brightly colored flags representing the native countries of its 782 students. The neighborhoods immediately around the school are full of aging garden apartments and small brick homes that are havens for recent immigrants.

Dr. A. Robyn Mathias, the principal, finds that many of the students who enter Rolling Terrace needing help with English were born in the United States. But they have grown up listening to other languages at home, on the streets and on cable television. Mathias likes to hire Peace Corps veterans for the faculty. She finds their experience teaching in poor foreign lands is good preparation for Rolling Terrace.

A key element in the "close the gap" segment of Weast's program cut the size of kindergarten classes at Rolling Terrace almost in half, to about fifteen children. This has become the norm for kindergartens in nearly half the county's elementary schools, the schools with high indicators of poverty and English language problems and, generally, low test scores. Weast is betting that a year or two of schooling with extra personal attention can help the children at Rolling Terrace and schools like it catch up.

When I dropped in on Paul Dowell's kindergarten class on a couple of mornings last spring, it looked as if the program was paying off. Dowell is a friendly, intense young man with a tattoo and an earring. By this time in the year, most of his kids were beginning to read and write. He sat them down in a semi-circle. In a joint effort, he had them finish a sentence on a large piece of white paper: "The three..." A boy named Luis stood up and wrote "pigs," as his classmates prodded him, calling out "puh, puh," for "p." Someone else wrote "love" and someone else wrote "to." A girl named Moesha finished with "eat."

Dowell's class has some high-tech toys to play and learn with. He has a digital camera and he can take and print out photos in seconds. Sometimes, during the school day, Dowell will take a picture and let a child send it in an email message to a mother or father at work. He took a picture of me reading a copy of National Geographic to some children. He loaded it into a computer and assigned Lyssy Duran-Boodoo to write a caption. Lyssy complied with alacrity. "ME and kevin and kuolin [Cullen] is wundreing haw to see wut is a megsing [magazine]," she typed.

Such feats were once thought beyond the capability of most kindergarteners, a veteran Rolling Terrace teacher told me. "Our kindergarten goals used to be lower," she said. "Just teaching the letters was considered good."

The future impact of all-day kindergarten with small classes remains to be gauged. Test results announced by the county late in 2002

showed progress in reading skills by kindergarten and first-grade children in schools that benefited from Weast's full-day, small-class initiative, particularly among minorities. But the progress was uneven. Children from poor families and children who had trouble with English learned the benchmark reading skills at roughly half the rate of other children.

"There is no silver bullet," for the problems of schools with high percentages of poor children and children with cultural challenges, Weast said in an interview. "The approach has to be multifaceted. More time matters. Building size matters. Class size matters. But they don't matter much if you don't change the curriculum. Teacher training matters--extremely. You need a great teacher in every classroom."

He has begun a nationally recognized program to review the performance of tenured teachers. Those who get deficient grades are offered retraining. If they fail the retraining or decline it, they can be fired. In two years seven teachers have been dismissed and thirty more have resigned or retired rather than be dismissed.

Weast has also encouraged the growth of programs that he hopes will help the county retain bright, high-achieving kids whose parents might be tempted to send them to private schools. One example is the international baccalaureate program, which requires high school students to take the rough equivalent of two years of advanced placement courses in English, history, math, science and a foreign language. They must complete a 4,000-word research paper, then pass examinations that are graded by teachers from all over the world. If they manage to do all that, they are awarded a high school diploma that is an internationally acknowledged symbol of excellence.

Until recently, Montgomery County had one IB program, at Richard Montgomery High School. It was open only to 100 students, chosen from around the county, who got in through a very competitive entrance process. Recently, the county has added two more IB programs, at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School and at

Springbrook, outside Silver Spring. Unlike the Richard Montgomery program, they are open to anyone in the school who wants to try them. There are plans to add another IB program at Watkins Mill High School in Gaithersburg, Ingrid Duran's almost-alma mater.

I visited Springbrook's IB program. The school's hallways between classes call to mind a busy day in the International Arrivals Building at Dulles. There are brown faces, white faces, yellow faces, black faces. There are girls in tube tops with rings in their navels. There are girls with long, baggy dresses and kerchiefs covering their hair.

As it's become a melting pot, Springbrook has struggled with the image of a school in decline, principal Mike Durso told me. "There are people who tend to write a school off once it becomes heavily black and Hispanic," Durso said.

The IB program is part of the effort to fight that tendency. "Middle class parents are attracted to it. It's an effort to stem the perception that we're not the school we used to be."

The program draws in forty or fifty students per class, so it directly involves fewer than 10 percent of Springbrook's students. But since the program started, more Springbrook students have been taking advanced placement courses and more have been taking the SATs. The program seems to have had a ripple effect throughout the school.

The class I observed was discussing the Russian Revolution. Teacher Amy Greene distributed a packet of original materials-translated articles from *Pravda*, copies of old propaganda fliers urging the peasants to help smash the kulaks. She asked the class to use the materials to discuss why Lenin in the early 1920s shifted Russia from war communism to the more liberal New Economic Policy.

"Food requisitioning wasn't working," David Einstein said. "They had to get rid of it and replace it with a tax."

"Lenin was like Bismarck, a practitioner of realpolitik," a girl named Angela Morales offered.

It was a discussion that would have seemed perfectly appropriate in the Russian history course I took in college. But the diversity of the kids sitting at the desks was in some respects more impressive than what they said. To these kids, the history of Russia's tragic experience with a communist dictatorship could be personal.

One boy, Alec Yu, had grandparents who spent years in jail during China's Cultural Revolution. Another, Omer Siddiq, had spent his childhood in Kuwait and Sudan, a region wracked by ideological conflict, before his family managed to get to the United States. They could offer perspectives unavailable in the typical private school or the white bread suburban high school of yore. Watching this class, one could glimpse the educational potential of melting-pot suburban schools--if they can combine their diversity with rigorous educational standards.

The Springbrook IB program hasn't been around long enough to be fully evaluated. Research suggests that expensive special programs are not guaranteed remedies. The test results Montgomery County has recorded since the "close the gap, raise the bar" program began have been mixed. The county's schools had their best-ever average math SAT score in 2002, 560. They had the second-highest systemwide average aggregate score in the county's history, 1095. But the performance of Hispanic students on the SAT still lagged about 200 points behind the performance of white and Asian students. The average performance of African-American students declined a few points. The bar was raised slightly, but the gap was not closing.

Weast's approach has critics. One of them is Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation, the author of a book called *All Together Now* that advocates economic integration of the schools as the most effective way to address

the achievement gap between the children of the poor and the children of the middle class.

"Compensatory spending for low-income kids has been far less effective than we'd hoped," Kahlenberg says. "We've been at it for 30 years and not much has worked."

Kahlenberg believes that public schools can educate children of all classes as long as children of the middle class remain a majority in each school. Middle class parents demand good facilities and teachers, proper upkeep and high educational standards. All students benefit from that. It's the educational equivalent of the economic adage that a rising tide lifts all boats.

Weast could have proposed redrawing the boundaries that determine which schools serve which neighborhoods. Montgomery County's poor and ethnically diverse students come disproportionately from a band of neighborhoods that begins near the District line in Takoma Park and runs up the center of the county through Silver Spring, Wheaton, Rockville, and Gaithersburg. It might be possible to redraw boundaries and use busing to disperse these students more evenly throughout the system.

But politically, redrawing the boundaries of a suburban school district is the rough equivalent of getting neighborhood approval for construction of a nuclear power plant. Few things rile suburban parents more than the possibility that their home will be reassigned to a district whose schools they perceive to be worse than the ones they have.

Durso, who has seen district administrators come and go, smiled when I suggested the possibility of redrawing district lines. "In my experience," he said, "superintendents only propose redrawing district boundaries when they're very close to retirement."

Weast said he considered re-drawing school districts but decided against it. "You'd face political issues if you tried it," he said. "But you'd also face practical issues of busing and over-crowding. We have overcrowding now in

all parts of the county. Re-drawing the lines would take someone from one overcrowded building to another. The option that was left was to address concerns in both groups"--the students who are doing well and those who need more help.

**What** is at stake in suburban schools is more than the education of children. Take, for instance, the value of two homes, one within a block of Springbrook High, which has average SAT scores below the county's average, and one within a block of Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, a school which regularly posts the highest average SAT scores in the county system. In the 1970s, the two homes, which are of nearly identical size, were valued roughly equally. The house near Springbrook sold for \$125,000 in 1977. The house near Whitman sold for \$90,000 in 1973. But by the latest round of tax assessments, a gap had emerged. The house near Springbrook was valued at \$303,580. The house near Whitman was valued at \$518,210.

That \$215,000 gap is one the things that can happen when a community's schools are perceived to decline. If public school performance falters in Washington's suburbs, it will affect not just the students, but everyone who lives there. Property tax rates will rise as property values lag. The suburbs will become less attractive places to live.

For that and other reasons, many people hope that Jerry Weast and the suburban public schools succeed. Ted Einstein is one. "We still haven't decided where we want Nathan to go to high school," he said. "I'm still hopeful that it might be a public school."

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