

California Parents GOING BROKE for "FREE" Public Schools

▶▶▶ New book explores the reality of school choice and the middle class in America

BY VICKI MURRAY



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For more information, or to order your copy of *Not as Good as You Think: Why the Middle Class Needs School Choice* visit www.pacificresearch.org.

California families are struggling to pay for homes near what they have been led to believe are “good” public schools. Some unpleasant surprises await these “house-poor” families, who spend more than 35 percent of their incomes on housing.

Their ranks have quadrupled in just one generation. Home prices for families with school-age children are also growing three times faster than other families. The problem is especially acute in the Golden State, whose cities litter the top-100 list of highest housing foreclosure rates.

Desperation to get their children into decent schools drives many California parents to stretch their budgets to the breaking point—parents like Debra, who was willing to trade in her North Hollywood house for a \$400,000 Malibu mobile home so she could enroll her child in a good kindergarten class.

But just how good are those upscale public schools? As a new book by the Pacific Research Institute puts it: *Not as Good as You Think: Why the Middle Class Needs School Choice*. At more than one in 10 affluent California public schools, a majority of students in at least one grade score below grade-level proficiency in English or math on the California Standards Test (CST), the state’s main standardized exam.

These are schools that enroll one-third or fewer low-income and one-third or fewer economically disadvantaged students. Many of them are also located in areas with median home prices approaching, and even exceeding, \$1 million. Saratoga’s Prospect High School in Silicon Valley, for example, is in one of the country’s most expensive zip codes with a median home price of \$1.6 million.

At Prospect High, more than half of its 10th and 11th graders in 2006 were not proficient in English, even though only eight percent of its students are English language learners. Less than a quarter of students are proficient in algebra I, not even two out of five are proficient in algebra II, and barely one in 10 is proficient in geometry on the CST.

Hundreds more affluent California schools made it into PRI’s new book. One such city is Torrance. This beach community near Los Angeles is home to some the most famous high schools in America. Torrance High was the setting of *Beverly Hills 90210* and South High, the location of the 1999 film *American Beauty*. But when slightly more than half of those high-school students score proficient in English, and less than a third test college-ready in English, the fancy facades aren’t much consolation to parents paying mortgages on \$700,000 homes.

For too long families in California and across the country have been led to believe that poor-quality schools are an inner-city problem best solved by moving to the suburbs where the “good” public schools are. Data from the Nation’s Report Card tell a very different story. On average, about 60 percent of 4th and 8th graders in any given state who are not poor score below grade-level proficiency in math and reading.

Given the current housing market, middle-income families may now find themselves trapped in homes they can barely afford to keep and cannot afford to sell at a loss—all for schools that fail to deliver. There is a remedy.

Legislators should end the current monopoly system of assigned schooling and put parents in charge of their children’s education dollars. That would expand their educational opportunities without putting them in the poorhouse. ■