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EDUCATION A PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY : Enriched by Vibrant Diversity : Private schools are a private solution, and their growth mirrors the erosion of involvement throughout society.

February 18, 1990 Robert Gottlieb | *Robert Gottlieb is on the faculty of the UCLA Urban Planning Program*

My son, who is in the first grade, goes to McKinley Elementary School, located in the mid-city area of Santa Monica. There is an extraordinary and wonderful diversity at this school.

This year's kindergarten class, for example, has 62 students, 38 of whom speak a language other than English at home. Fifteen of the children speak Spanish, and among the remaining 23 kids, 12 other languages are spoken. All together, there are kids from 45 nationalities in a school of 450 students, an ethnic flowering that does justice to the concept of Greater Los Angeles as a "world city."

There is also a wide diversity in economic levels at McKinley. Though some families are homeowners or live in condos, most McKinley families tend to be at the lower end of Santa Monica's income scale. A number of the kids are homeless (about 3% of the school-age population this year, but as high as 10% last year). As many as 15% of the kids do not live in Santa Monica. Their families work in the city, and school board policy allows the children to attend Santa Monica schools. This policy is particularly relevant in the McKinley area, where there has been an explosion of commercial development.

When I drop my son off in the morning, I love to walk through the schoolyard. There is a magnificent vibrancy, a special richness to how kids from such a variety of families interact and enjoy each other.

The school has a number of teachers, several just launching their careers, who also seem to relish the challenges inherent in the situation. This year, my son is in a bilingual class that he loves, although in some ways "bilingual" is a euphemism. Ultimately, perhaps, McKinley is no different from other schools in that the kids are taught to read and write in English, do math and learn much of the standard state curriculum. The diversity is in the numbers and in the daily life of the school beyond what is formally taught.

Despite this richness of opportunities, McKinley, like nearly all our public schools, confronts a range of serious problems. Per-pupil spending in California has declined dramatically, from \$4,200 to less than \$3,200, in this post-Proposition 13 era. That means more students per class, less equipment, less money for teacher salaries and and less money to upgrade facilities. Fund raising by McKinley parents averages about \$25 to \$50 per pupil, compared to a couple of the schools north of us, where wealthier parents have been able to raise as much as \$1,250 per pupil.

McKinley also has to contend with problems stemming from commercial development: more traffic, smog, noise and different land uses. Yet the Santa Monica City Council, which has been at the forefront in arranging developer agreements responsible for such community needs as additional low-income housing or on-site environmental innovations, has never included support for public schools, despite the fact that they are directly affected by these developments.

Perhaps most disturbing is the contrast between the school population and the neighborhood population. Though Santa Monica has the undeserved reputation of being primarily a wealthy enclave (both the income levels and ethnic makeup of the entire city tend to reflect Los Angeles County averages), there are to be sure middle- and upper-class residents, including McKinley's neighborhood.

Although some of these residents do not have children, an increasing number do. Many of these children are being sent not to the McKinleys but to private schools. Though these schools pay lip service to "diversity" by offering a handful of scholarships, tuition cost alone (about \$6,000) ensures a class and racial exclusivity.

This two-tier public-private school division is at the heart of the dilemma for schools like McKinley. Private schools are a private solution, and their growth mirrors the erosion of citizen involvement throughout society. We have learned of the importance of taking responsibility from such issues as environmental degradation. So too, the schools have to become our public responsibility, from our individual choices to our actions at the community and statewide level. And as I walk through this schoolyard, listening to the excitement of the children, I wish their vibrancy could extend to our communities and to the larger society, where public engagement remains so elusive.