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# A Tale of Two School Systems

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Most readers of this article know someone who lived in Jacksonville in their twenties, but moved to one of our region's "outer counties" (usually St. Johns or Clay County) after childbirth in order to avoid Duval public schools. The same problem exists in metropolitan areas around the United States: from coast to coast, families flee to suburbs and exurbs in order to avoid urban public schools.

Why are urban public schools so obnoxious to parents? The conventional wisdom is that urban schools are simply "bad" schools. This argument comes in two forms: a liberal version and a conservative version.

The liberal version of the argument is that urban schools are troubled only because they are underfunded, and if they were funded as generously as suburban schools the "quality gap" between urban and suburban schools would disappear.

The liberal "bad schools" theory is based on the assumption that urban schools do in fact spend less than suburban schools. In fact, Duval schools actually spend more than St. Johns schools: Duval spends \$7633 per pupil, compared to St. Johns County's \$7178. And both counties spend an equal amount on instruction: Duval spends 58% of its money on instruction (as opposed to staff support, administration, etc.) and St. Johns spends 57%. Similarly, both school districts have similar average class sizes (20.73 for Duval, 21.25 for St. Johns). Thus, there is no reason to believe that Duval is more inefficient than St. Johns.

Even when big-city schools outspend suburbs by huge margins, they do not out-achieve suburban schools. For example, in the 1980s and early 1990s, a federal court sought to resolve a desegregation dispute by ordering Missouri to subsidize the Kansas City, Mo. school system in order to help the city compete with suburban schools. As a result, the Kansas City school district spent more than twice as much as some suburban school districts. Even today, Kansas City spends \$10,741 per pupil, over 30% more than the Missouri statewide average. Yet the city/suburb test score gap in Kansas City did not narrow much, and the Kansas City school district remains unable to attract suburbanites.

The conservative version of the "bad schools" theory is that urban school bureaucrats are simply less competent than suburban bureaucrats- and that by some bizarre coincidence, this happens to be the case in almost every metropolitan area in America.

If this was truly the case, "bad" urban school districts would have bad schools, regardless of the nature of the schools' student bodies, or the steps that the schools took to funnel out low achievers. But this is not the case: in fact, many urban school districts have at least one or two impressive high schools. For example, Jacksonville's Stanton High has test scores as high as those of any suburban district: 93% of Stanton tenth graders score above grade level in reading tests, nearly twice the achievement level of St. Johns County (where 53% of tenth graders scored at or above grade level), and more than six times the achievement level of nearby Andrew Jackson High (where 13% of tenth graders reached this level). Other urban districts also have "showcase schools". For example, in Buffalo, City Honors High School has test scores comparable to those of the "best"

suburban schools, and Boston's Boston Latin has the second highest SAT scores in the state of Massachusetts. These schools are run by the same bureaucrats who run the same "bad" schools in their school districts- yet they achieve excellent results.

In sum, most urban schools are "worse" (measured by test scores and similar data) than suburban schools- but the best urban schools perform as highly as suburban schools. How come?

A typical urban school is dominated by students from a nearby neighborhood- so if the neighborhood is full of underprivileged children with undereducated parents, so is the school. And those children will typically not do as well in school as middle-class children, because they lack a wide variety of advantages (e.g., being read to from birth, being subjected to more complex vocabularies, better nutrition, prenatal care). Thus, the "worst" urban schools perform poorly because of their students' background. By contrast, the "best" schools screen out low achievers, either through entrance exams or rigorous curricula (or, in the case of suburban schools, residence requirements that keep out poor children from other school districts).

To put the facts another way: the "superiority" of the supposedly "good" schools is really the superiority of their students. Selective schools that exclude low achievers generally have the highest test scores and the best reputations, while schools filled with underprivileged children will have the lowest test scores and the worst reputations, whether they are in an urban or a suburban school district. In other words, if the Duval and St. Johns school districts retained their current bureaucracies but switched students, parents would be fleeing St. Johns for Duval rather than vice versa.

So what? What can Duval County do about this? Duval has two separate yet interrelated problems: the difficulty of educating disadvantaged children, and the difficulty of retaining middle-class families.

Unfortunately, the former problem is much harder to solve, because educating underprivileged children to suburban standards is like building a car that gets 100 miles per gallon: numerous isolated experiments have been successful, but as far as I know, no school district in our country has been able to do it on a mass scale. Thus, we cannot assume that we, as a civilization, know how to quickly eliminate the test score gap between the average urban school and the average suburban school - at least not for dozens of schools at a time. The difficulty of this task means that just as we cannot wait for cars to get 100 miles per gallon before becoming more energy-efficient in other ways, we cannot wait for every urban school to sparkle before using less ambitious measures to retain our middle class.

What about retaining middle-class children? One solution could be to create more schools like Stanton, schools oriented towards high-achieving pupils. In a world with unlimited resources, for example, the county could create many selective schools: a few for the top 10% of the class, a few for the second 10%, and so forth. The advantage of such a system would be that every high-achieving student would be able to attend

“good” (i.e. selective) schools without leaving Duval County - which in turn means that suburban schools would no longer be more appealing to those students’ parents.

On the other hand, it could be argued that this strategy would make the problem of poverty-packed schools even harder to solve. One such concern is that the loss of better students to selective schools would worsen the plight of our region’s most troubled schools. But the children of affluent and/or motivated parents can already flee troubled schools by moving to St. Johns and Clay Counties. It logically follows that there is simply no way to keep high-achieving students inside Duval schools if their parents are dissatisfied with Duval schools.

A stronger argument is that in a world of limited resources, Duval must focus its resources on the students most in need of assistance. But this reality must be balanced against a countervailing reality: a city that fails to accommodate its middle classes and its high-achieving students will lose the parents who can afford to move to suburbia, which means it becomes dominated by the poor, which means it loses its tax base and has fewer resources for everyone. Would Jacksonville’s schools really be better off if Jacksonville lost its middle class?