

With Privilege Comes Responsibility

Steve Nelson, Head, The Calhoun School

Growing up in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, my knowledge of private schools was quite limited. I attended public schools, as did virtually everyone I knew. My friends and I used the grass lawns of the private Laurel School and University School as our touch football fields, often to the chagrin of the groundskeepers. I first set foot in a private school building in 1962 on a blind date at the Hathaway Brown School. The date didn't go so well. My next private school visit was in 1998, when I first interviewed at the Calhoun School. That went better—and here I am, retiring after 19 years as Calhoun's head. Who knew?

In 1962, it seemed to me that private schools were places of mysterious privilege. (The more egalitarian “independent” school characterization was not in common use in those days.) Cleveland's suburban private schools were attended mostly by children of wealthy families. We weren't poor—my father was a college professor—but the kids in those schools at that time seemed to live in another world: cotillion balls, white dinner jackets, certain affectations, summer camps and dancing schools.

I don't mean this critically. I looked in from the outside with a sense of romance. Later in high school I became friends with some students from these schools, but never felt I was really a part of it all, despite my best efforts to emulate the social ease with which they seemed to navigate life. By the time I walked into Calhoun in 1998 I had learned that independent schools, including those of my Cleveland childhood, had become much more interesting and eclectic than my adolescent experience suggested.

While “independent” is partially employed as a less exclusive euphemism for “private,” the independence is real. As an educational and political progressive, I've accepted the euphemism with ambivalence. “Independent” implies, often explicitly insists, that our schools are exempt from much public policy. I deeply appreciate the freedom, while also recognizing the privilege implicit in operating outside the constraints of public education.

Now, as I reflect on 19 years as head of a private/independent school, my ambivalence is heightened. Freedom accompanied by privilege should trigger responsibility, not entitlement. It is that responsibility I wish to address in my Parents League swan song.

Privilege has always allowed us to select our students, to develop our own unique cultures and traditions and to offer enviable resources to our students.

That privilege is exponentially greater in the current era. Particularly since No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2002, public schools have been subjected to testing and accountability expectations that have arguably made many public schools, particularly schools in neglected urban communities, less joyful, less humane and less diverse. Alas, some No Excuses charter schools have exacerbated the problems of public education.

In at least one respect, our schools have exercised social leadership in a notably responsible way. Counter-intuitively, independent schools have become increasingly diverse, while public schools have become alarmingly re-segregated. This has been part of our country's sad racial trajectory: Segregated schools and communities became more diverse by law and ethical commitment during the 60s and 70s, then moved back toward sharp segregation in recent decades. The dynamics are complicated, and my intent is not an essay in race demographics. But the loss of diversity in America's communities and schools is regressive and disappointing. Most independent schools have taken bold steps to diversify and we should be provisionally pleased, while not unjustifiably proud.

During my 19 years, Calhoun kids have had remarkable experiences and so have I. They've traveled to places like China and Cuba. They've built magnificent machines and written unspeakably beautiful poems. They've made me laugh until my stomach hurt and cry until my heart ached. They've found their own unique voices and crafted their own lives. They've stunned me with their generosity of spirit. During my years I've had a tradition called "junior meetings." It started as a whim. I meet with each member of the junior class individually for an hour or two. We talk about life. They often reveal things that their peers—sometimes their families—don't know about them. I've had nearly 1,000 honest, intimate conversations with teenagers. It has been among the great privileges in my life.

I suspect the heads of most independent schools could offer similar reflection. Our privilege allows us to draw our students into deeply satisfying and thoughtful lives. But we must recognize and care that these experiences ought not be limited to only those children who are lucky enough to enroll in our schools. Non-sectarian private schools enroll only about 6 percent of America's children.

So what about the other millions of children? Do we who carry privilege also bear responsibility? I think so.

One of the more deceptive political tactics in education reform is the false promise of "choice." Despite our sincere efforts to diversify and our generous tuition assistance budgets, only a rare few young folks actually have the "choice" to attend a school like Calhoun or most other independent schools. For the least privileged children in America "school choice" is sometimes a Sophie's Choice between a bleak, enervating, underfunded

public school or a rigid, highly programmed charter school with strict emphasis on conformity and compliance. In some of these schools, there is little time for beauty: Children read stories only so they can answer multiple choice questions; they are infrequently invited or allowed to express a point of view; they are bound by the conventional, not encouraged toward the original; and their passion is suppressed or, too often, punished. With long school hours, long school years and long hours of homework, they have less time for play and pleasure than most of the adults who place these heavy loads on their thin shoulders.

If you share my belief that education should draw children into deeply satisfying and ethical lives, it certainly is not the direction our nation has taken, especially for poor children. When I think of the richness of my life, Calhoun students' lives, my children's lives, and my grandchildren's lives, I am infuriated at the images of small children marching silently through school, grinding toward the next stressful test.

Many independent schools identify as "private schools with a public purpose." Most schools, whether or not explicitly stating such a purpose, engage in community service or service learning. The tradition of giving back is deeply ingrained in most of our schools. These traditions of serving the community are necessary but insufficient. Too often, even in our progressive school, service to the community is a form of educational noblesse oblige. By recognizing the obligation that accompanies privilege, we are inspired to be charitable and kind. But we must remind ourselves that charity is a sad necessity that fills the holes that injustice leaves behind. I hope our work can help our students understand the difference between charity and justice and to put our charitable programs out of business by making them unnecessary.

Independent school leaders, parents and students have enormous collective influence and resources. Several years ago a coalition of New York City school heads, led by Bob Siebert of the Churchill School, placed a full-page ad in the *New York Times* deploring gun violence. More recently I helped Angie Bergeson (then at the IDEAL School) gather scores of our schools to join a petition to address city traffic safety. Calhoun still reels from the 2014 death of our own third-grader Cooper Stock, struck and killed by a careless taxi driver while holding his father's hand in a crosswalk. Our students are, of course, at risk of gun and traffic violence, so efforts to limit the mayhem are enlightened self-interest.

Our schools often stretch beyond enlightened self-interest. We teach our students about systemic racism, food injustice and climate change. We challenge our students to understand gender identity and move beyond mere tolerance toward the full embrace of all humans. We are doing good work within our comfortable boundaries and occasionally beyond. But are we

doing anything at all to insist that all of America's children have the same rich opportunities we provide to our own? Not much, I think.

Education reform is a volatile political issue. Many, I among them, worry that complex forces are leading toward privatizing of a public good. It seems that independent school leaders are largely silent in this raging debate, perhaps because we think being private school educators, trustees, parents or students disqualifies us from engaging in discourse about public education. But I think the opposite. I believe our privilege obligates us to engage in debate about public education. We don't surrender citizenship by virtue of our private school affiliations.

I will not presume to tell readers what to think about any particular charter schools or other aspects of the rapidly changing educational environment. I do worry that our long-established, rational system of public education, circumscribed by a constitutional obligation for equity, is at significant risk. Advocates of school choice, vouchers or expansion of charter schools often do not share a vision of how their work would create an equivalent system of equal opportunity. They appear to be committed to blowing up the house without offering a blueprint for rebuilding.

We may risk accusations of hypocrisy if we rail against school choice as we sit in our privileged independence. But the issues are categorically different. A system of independent schools has been part of our eclectic democratic republic for many generations. We have existed in relative harmony, and independent schools have never leached resources from public education. We should not allow ourselves to be cited as justification for the political shenanigans underway in this era. We do indeed have a privileged choice, but we also support public education through our tax dollars. Some architects of current school choice are doing no such thing, shifting resources from the traditional public system into their own, less accountable, system.

While independent schools vary in mission and culture, there are nearly universal values we share. In our schools, children are treated with dignity and compassion rather than being subjected to strictly regimented discipline. Our schools place great emphasis on imagination and creativity. Our students have time to play, to speak their minds, to wrestle with complicated ideas.

Our children can take risks without fear of scorn or consequences. They are encouraged to explore leadership rather than being trained into compliance and conformity. Our students are largely exempt from excessive and stressful testing. Our teachers are free to develop experiences that attend to children's real interests and appropriate stages of cognitive and emotional development.

Might we stipulate that all children should have these experiences?

Perhaps this essay is a polemic without a prescription. If you agree that

our independent school privilege carries a companion responsibility, it is each individual's choice as to how that responsibility is discharged. We can take positions on public policy. We can partner with public schools. We can lobby for public school funding and educational equity. We can speak out against rigid, humiliating disciplinary practices. We can fiercely advocate for the arts in all schools.

As I leave Calhoun, I will devote more attention to the education of all children than I will to the wonderful world I am leaving. It's not because I haven't cherished my work. It is because our independent schools are, by and large, thriving, while public education is in crisis.

To echo my theme, it has been my great privilege to be part of this dynamic Manhattan independent school world for these 19 years. That privilege has prepared and enabled me to advocate with conviction for the well-being of all children. I hope in some way, large or small, you'll join me in this advocacy.

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