

PUBLICATION

Choices

April 27, 2017

I live in Atlanta, Georgia, the crown jewel of the Southeast. Along with its benefits, we enjoy dense traffic, inconsistent sports teams and challenged public schools. I mention the latter as my wife and I have sent both of our children (ages 17 and 14) to public school since they were kindergarteners.

Our initial decision was easy. We moved to a neighborhood with a great elementary school that the neighborhood kids attended. Attrition set in beginning in fourth grade, as our children's friends peeled off to secure spots at competitive private schools. About that time, we began hearing rumors about the local middle schools, where drugs were "everywhere," teachers were "awful" and violence was "rampant."

Had public schools gotten so much worse since my wife and I attended them? Upon drilling down, many of these characterizations turned out to be exaggerated or even made up. Conversations with parents who actually sent their children to them revealed an imperfect learning environment, but one filled with homework, extracurricular activities, buses, friends and teachers that sounded awfully familiar. In short, a normal teenage existence. Insecure in our decision, we nevertheless sent them on their way and haven't once reconsidered.

To be sure, this decision has impacted us in many ways, some of which I never would have expected. Our kids' high school is "majority-minority," so most of their friends (and all of my daughter's boyfriends) look different than us. Their middle and high schools have large free and reduced lunch programs, so we talk about whether or not our kids want to have friends come over, or whether hosting them at our "rich house" would damage their school cred. We have experienced both great and not-so-great teachers. On graduation, their high school feeds mostly into smaller, local colleges as opposed to the Ivy League.

Through it all, my wife and I have enjoyed watching our kids mesh with the real world, struggle with familiar challenges and grow, perhaps, beyond their years. With luck, they will bring savvy and emotional intelligence, if not a high school pedigree, along with them to college and beyond. I can't wait to see what comes next for them.