

*From one corner of
the country to another
the message is going out
to parents and students —
if you want an education,*

HELP YOURSELF

*By Jack
Shafer*

“It is heresy to start your own school,” says Dr. Anyim Palmer. “We are heretics. We have shown that it doesn’t take elaborate facilities, it doesn’t take credentialed, degreed, certificated teachers, and it doesn’t take mammoth salaries to give children a good education.”

Palmer should know. As the self-described yard boy, janitor, and founder of the Marcus Garvey Pre-school and Elementary in Los Angeles’s predominantly black Crenshaw District, he has dealt with the problems of educating children on a day to day basis for the past six years—ever since he founded the school in 1975 with \$20,000 and a fund of determination.

“It should be obvious why I started my own school,” he says. “The Los Angeles school system gives our children a negative self-image, a debased concept of their community and the land of their nativity, Africa. Our public schools are anti-literacy as far as black children are concerned. Test scores show that not all children in the public schools are being made illiterate. The white public schools in Bel Air and Brentwood”—two wealthy Los Angeles communities—“are doing a magnificent job. In the inner city the primary function of the public schools is to lessen our potential as competitors.”

Palmer’s 16-member staff draws salaries ranging from \$500 to \$1,200 a month. Parents, who include both welfare recipients and doctors, pay around \$120 a month in tuition. “The school is flat broke now, but we have our dignity,” Palmer says.

He suggests that there is already increasing “black flight” from the public schools and that it will become more intense. There are two other black private schools in the im-





mediate area and an estimated 10,000 blacks attending Catholic schools in Los Angeles. "I want to see more private schools springing up," Palmer told me. "Each one is a victory for our community."

Palmer dismisses the accusation that private schools skim the cream of students off the public schools, and undermine them by denying proper role models to the less motivated blacks who are left behind. "You would have to convince the parents who bring their children to a school that is making their children literate and productive from a school that can't as to who is undermining whom," he says. Palmer's first and foremost goal is to make his students literate so that they will be able to compete in the real world.

A few miles across town, near the L.A.-Santa Monica border, John Nordquist, teacher and associate director at Crossroads School, is pondering the reasons for the establishment of his own predominantly upper-middle-class alternative school. "The problems 21

the public schools are facing seem so overwhelming that I don't see any other positive alternatives besides private schools," he says. "To start a school you need a real supportive group of parents, but you *can* start a school on a shoestring."

Crossroads was founded in 1971 with 34 seventh- and eighth-graders, two teachers, a part-time administrator, and \$2,000 in seed money, and made its first year's budget on tuition alone. (The school charges \$3,300 tuition, but reserves about ten percent of its budget for scholarships.) And in the short time since then, it has come a long way, maturing into a grade 7-12, coeducational, college-preparatory academy of 340 students. Crossroads graduates have been accepted by Yale, MIT, Stanford, Chicago, and Princeton. More important, as Nordquist himself puts it, "visitors to this campus are surprised to see students smiling, and their eyes alive."

Nordquist, a veteran public school teacher, clearly relishes the intimacy and freedom Crossroads offers. "The failure of the public schools to maintain high literacy standards has made it hard for us to find textbooks with an appropriate language level for our students," he says. "A 10th grade biology book gets written down to a 7th grade reading level. But unlike the public schools we have great freedom to introduce new books into courses in mid-year if it is appropriate. In the public schools it takes a couple of years to make any change in curriculum."

Marcus Garvey and Crossroads are only two of many examples of what should probably be regarded as the new wave in schooling—not only in Los Angeles, but all over the country: the rise of the private school. There are now about 560 private schools within the borders of the Los Angeles Unified School District. And that doesn't include the scores of private schools across the district's borders in Santa Monica, Glendale, and Beverly Hills. A rich variety of educational approaches flourishes in these private schools, both new and old: a personal involvement of students, parents, and teachers working together toward a common goal—educational miracles performed with tiny budgets, high morale, and a fierce sense of independence. There are \$4,000 tuition college prep-schools steeped in tradition and ivy, and \$90 a month "white flight" academies conducting half-day sessions in mobile trailer-classrooms. There are schools based on the educational precepts of Montessori, Piaget, Dewey, and Erikson. There are technical schools and religious schools. There are schools catering to the handicapped, the working child, even the young Mensan. There is an *école Française*, and there are "back-to-basics" schools.

The diversity, autonomy, thrift, and accountability of the private schools fare well in any comparison with the homogeneous, centralized, wasteful, and unaccountable state schools—so well that the parents of over 100,000 Los Angeles students carry a double financial burden to free their children from the state schools they are coerced to finance so they can send them to the private schools they voluntarily support. Private schooling in Los Angeles is thriving.

At the same time, students are deserting the Los Angeles Unified School District. The district's enrollment has dropped by more than 100,000 in the past ten years, and only a third of that exodus has occurred since the start of court-ordered busing in 1978. Today nearly 20 percent of the district's children attend private schools, compared to a state-wide average of 10 percent.

There are multiple causes for the decline of L.A. Unified

and the concomitant rise of the private schools. The cumulative failures of the district in the last decade—student and teacher malperformance, fiscal irresponsibility, the busing imbroglio, the lowering of academic standards, inefficiency, growing dehumanization, lack of accountability—have finally added up in the minds of the district's subjects—people of all races, faiths, politics, and economic classes—and more and more of them have decided to abandon state for private schooling and educate their children as they see fit. After all, they reason, how can we do any worse than L.A. Unified?

Both *New West* and *Los Angeles* magazines have recently run articles on how declining L.A. Unified standards are jeopardizing students' chances of getting into the more selective colleges. Some students are attending local junior colleges or private schools to pick up the calculus and language electives the best colleges demand.

L.A. Unified can't even keep track of its own textbooks. In early December it was disclosed that while 75,419 unused textbooks collected dust in predominantly white schools, the RIMS schools, minority schools excluded from the mandatory desegregation plan, were 200,000 books short. Ada Mermer, principal of an East Side RIMS school, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We've needed [the books] for a couple of years."

The L.A. Unified desegregation plan uses a lottery to choose the white and minority students who will be bused to achieve racial balance in the schools. Like the draft registration laws that round young men up for conscription, compulsory attendance laws summon most children into the public school lottery. If a draftee pulls a low lottery number he must serve the state's foreign policy. If a student draws a busing lottery-number, *he* must serve what the state calls "social justice" by being bused. Given this analogy, the students of the Calabasas Academy in the west end of Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley are lottery resisters.

The Calabasas Academy is disdainfully referred to by some as a "white flight" school, because it was established by Dr. Richard Kritzer during the first wave of court-ordered busing in 1978 as a "Canada" for busing dodgers. But for the most part the parents of Calabasas's students were satisfied with the job L.A. Unified was doing before busing. For them busing was only the first straw; but it was a very heavy straw, heavy enough to drive them out of the public schools. And many of them found, once they'd been shocked out of automatically and unthinkingly sending their children to the state schools, that they hadn't really been happy with the way their children were being publicly schooled after all.

As one Calabasas 8th grader put it, "In the public schools you can hide, and I did. Most teachers don't care. They're there to draw a paycheck, and they can't be fired. At Calabasas the teachers know who you are and know if you're doing your homework, and boy do they pile the homework on!"

Debby Daniels, the owner of Woodland Village Elementary and Pre-school, says much the same thing. "I got my own kids out of the public schools because they had become numbers," she told me. "We are here to teach, not to fill out forms. It's a cleaner and easier operation." Due to parent demand Daniels added 6th grade this year and is under pressure to expand the school to higher grades—and only partly because of the busing furor. But, restricted as she is by zoning laws, she wonders if she will be able to locate a facility. And even at 18 percent, loans for schools are hard to

come by these days, so building on a new site seems definitely out of reach. Nevertheless, she says, "We'll find a way."

Meanwhile, one of her own daughters commutes over the Hollywood Hills to the newly formed New Jewish High School located in the basement of Temple Beth El. Dr. Sheldon Dorph, the headmaster, says, "Our school is for the student and parent who want to integrate the Jewish education with their general education. Orthodox Jews have had these sorts of schools for centuries, but for the Conservative, Reformed, and Liberal Jews this is really a new trend. In the last 20 or 30 years it's really taken off. We want our kids to see their lives as a whole. We teach that religion adds a dimension of meaning to subjects like science that they need to consider. For instance, with genetic engineering you can have the religion teacher and the science instructor engage in a dialogue before the class."

With 57 students and a projected 100 for next year, New Jewish High charges \$3,000 tuition, which covers about 40 percent of its budget. The remainder comes from donations from the Jewish community.

Why are non-Orthodox Jews, traditional supporters of the public schools, now starting their own? Dr. Dorph responds, "People want quality programs. People are rethinking what public education should be. Vocations are changing. Public schools don't seem to be able to change quickly enough due to their size and bureaucratic structure. They are using a model developed 30 years ago and they aren't providing the skills needed. Private schools are more responsive to the needs of their clientele."

Judith Goldman of Wildwood Elementary, a parent-owned and operated school, tells a similar story. "Parents brought their children here," she says, "because they were looking for something, not because they were running from something." One of the things parents look for and find at Wildwood, Goldman believes, is a place where programmed materials like textbooks are avoided. "Teaching has become pretty mechanistic in the public schools," she says, "as people have given control of teaching materials over to the corporations who have developed the mass textbooks." Last year, instead of using the monolithic textbook for instruction, one class integrated all the facets of reading, math, history, and economics by running their class as a Colonial American village. The students printed money, wrote newspapers, and conducted mock trials.

Perhaps the most unusual of the emerging private school alternatives in Los Angeles is the Home Tutorial Program headed by Mike Gould. California's compulsory schooling laws allow home tutorials by credentialed teachers when approved by the local school district under state guidelines.

"Home Tutorial started out as an alternative to busing, but it's more than getting kids out of public school, it's getting them a good education," says Gould. The \$30 a week Home Tutorial fee goes directly to the teachers, whose tutorial groups never exceed 6 students.

The 350 students in the grades 1-8 program have field trips, graduation ceremonies, and a yearbook. Teachers have developed common standards and meet regularly to plan curricula. Says Gould, "More and more the government is telling us what we can and cannot do. I think it's good that there is room for people to solve problems voluntarily with a program like Home Tutorial."

Although the state requires tutors to possess credentials, private schools are free to hire non-credentialed teachers. And many do. Rick Martin, acting principal of Los Angeles

Lutheran High School, says, "The state credential is a throwaway to me. I look for teachers with a Church background." To John Nordquist of Crossroads, whose staff boasts non-credentialed teachers with Ph.D.s, a credential is only evidence that a person has made a commitment to education as a career. And it takes more than that, he says, to make a good teacher.

Likewise, the private schoolers do not hold accreditation in high regard—after all, the L.A. Unified schools are accredited. Nordquist says he finds that having an outsider assess his program gives him new insights into the relative strengths and weaknesses of Crossroads. But most of the others I talked with spoke of accreditation as "a security blanket for worried parents" or offered the approval and continued presence of parents and students as the best accreditation.

Most of the schools I visited try to set up scholarships, but find that just keeping above water can take all the money-punch they can muster. Curiously, few of them expressed much excitement when I asked them questions about tax credits or vouchers. Every one of them could use more money, of course, but most figure tax reform is as unlikely as educational reform, so they pursue private education instead of lost tax dollars.

None of the schools I visited had more than 450 students. The private schools prize the high student and teacher morale the small school generates—though the sense of community at these schools comes at least as much from their voluntary nature and their consensus over what educational theory to follow, as from their small size. Precisely because they are voluntary, private schools *unite* their self-defined communities. The public schools, on the other hand, *divide* people—over issues like desegregation, sex education, prayer, distribution of budget dollars, and the "subversive" content of library books. If you're displeased with a private school, you can transfer to another one or start a new one of your own. The political nature of the public schools encourages lawsuits, mudslinging campaigns, pressure groups, and conflict. That's the name of the game.

The public school is a branch of government. It has monopoly powers over a given geographical area, it has the power to tax, it has elections, it has massive bureaucracies, and it has a ruling class. For decades the rulers of L.A. Unified came from the white middle class. With whites now one of many minorities in Los Angeles, the district has become a battleground as various factions attempt to take control. And this has been the pattern in most other big city school systems in the U.S. as well.

The private school advocates in Los Angeles are not hard-core ideologues bent on smashing the state. But by revitalizing the tradition of private schooling in America they have demystified the role public education has come to play in our lives. The wall that separates the church from the state needs to be extended to separate education from the state. By establishing a prototype for how the market—that is, the voluntary association of individuals, their capital, and their labor—can privatize education as the state system decays, Los Angeles has shown us a way out of our educational morass and into a future in which government is walled out, but all the obstacles to learning, all the other walls created and maintained by government schools, are down for good.

Jack Shafer attended public schools in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is LR's Los Angeles correspondent.

LICENSING THE DANCERS

By Kathy
Sharp

How the Privacy Protection Act of 1980 Gets Around the First Amendment

Last October, on the same day President Carter was signing the Privacy Protection Act of 1980 into law, the Chicago Public Library Special Collections Division opened a special exhibit in the center of the library's high-ceilinged second floor rotunda lobby. The exhibit, made possible by a grant from the Playboy Foundation, was entitled "Anglo-American Struggle: Freedom of the Press, 1644-1837"—just as though its subject was purely historical and the struggle for press freedom was a victorious battle which Americans proudly won nearly 150 years ago.

If this were true, of course, there would have been no need for the Privacy Protection Act of 1980, a piece of legislation which was designed to protect journalists from the kinds of general newsroom searches approved by the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Stanford Daily* case of 1978. The struggle for press freedom has been and continues to be an ongoing one. And notwithstanding the effusions of journalists like the *New York Times*'s Anthony Lewis, who called for public celebration of the signing of the Privacy Protection Act, this latest legislative attempt to preserve press freedom is no more a final solution to the problem than any of the other attempts which preceded it. In fact, the Privacy Protection Act, whose provisions take effect for local and state law enforcement officers on October 13 of this year (they took effect January 1 for federal law enforcement officers), should probably be regarded as a step backward, a step toward *less* freedom of expression in the mass media.

