

Norby Notes

Orange County Update

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4th District Shines in America’s “Best” High School List

But Comparing Schools Misses the Whole Story of School Specialization, Diversity

Newsweek recently ranked “America’s 100 Top High Schools.” Ranking 93 and 94 were Troy and Sunny Hills High Schools. Both are in my Fourth District City of Fullerton. In fact, the Fourth District had more schools on the list than any other Orange County Supervisorial District. Warrior and Lancer parents, teachers and students can be proud of their schools’ ranking. Even those unrelated to the schools enjoy enhanced property values because of the rankings.

Comparing schools, however, is an inexact science. Like ranking restaurants or movies—or presidents—the criteria are subjective and apply to each student differently. Differing demographics or neighborhood conditions may cause school “A” to attract a different type of student than school “B,” with far higher test scores. That doesn’t mean school “B” is providing a better education, only that its students are at a higher level going in.

Schools reflect their students far more than students reflect their schools. Just because a school has a great number of high-performing students does not mean that a child will necessarily perform better there. Sunny Hills benefits from being in a socio-economic area of affluent and hard-pressing parents who demand high levels of achievement from their kids. Koreans, in particular, began flocking to Sunny Hills in the 1980s, with a study ethic typical of upwardly mobile, motivated, immigrant families.

Troy actually faced closure in the 1980s, when the old Yorba Linda School District merged with the Placentia U.S.D., thus diverting half of Troy’s student pool to Valencia, El Dorado and Esperanza. Thus, the Troy Tech program was born, acting as a magnet far beyond its shrunken attendance area. More than 40% of Troy students are transfers living outside Fullerton, a cream of top-echelon kids drawn by the hi-tech program. This has driven comparative test scores nationally prominent levels.

Does this mean that a given student is better off at one of Newsweek’s “Top 100” schools than his neighborhood school? Not necessarily.

Other area schools have individual specialties targeted to specific student interests. Fullerton High has a fine arts academy, producing high quality plays, musical theater and concerts. FHS also has a culinary academy for those pursuing careers as chefs and food servers. Sonora has a medical careers academy, attracting those going for college pre-med programs. Buena Park H.S. has the state’s only high school aviation program, taking advantage of its juxtaposition with Fullerton Airport. La Habra H.S. has a “Heritage of the Americas” program.

Attending a top ranked school has the advantage of prestige and the spin-off benefit of being surrounded by highly competitive students. But all high schools have such students, in varying numbers.

All high schools also have the other groups, such as jocks, druggies, the drama crowd, punkers, skateboarders, and other groups marked by differing dress styles and behaviors.

The advantage of attending a low-to-medium ranking school is that the student has a better chance of excelling relative to their peers. Graduating from a nationally prestigious school attracts college admissions officers' attention. But so does excelling in a school's with a more mixed academic standing. State policy is geared to admitting the top 5% of seniors at each high school to the UC system. That's a lot easier at Fullerton or Buena Park than at Troy or Sunny Hills.

Personally, I'm a second-generation Fullerton High graduate (Class of '68). My mother was a Class of '42 grad and I have two FHS alums on my staff ('65 and '66). Family traditions are important. My own son, Alex, will choose between attending Fullerton and Troy. It's his choice. There are advantages to both. His success in school is more a product of his own efforts rather than which school he attends.

