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## **California Dreamin'**

Delusions about school performance can hurt families in the pocketbook

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If the three most important words in real estate are “location, location, location,” the most important question for families might be “How good are the schools?”

Think about how many families you know who paid as much or even more than they could afford to buy a house because they believe the house is in a neighborhood with good schools.

The poor performance of many high-poverty schools is well known. But in a recently released book titled “Not As Good as You Think: Why the Middle Class Needs School Choice,” the San Francisco-based conservative think tank Pacific Research Institute ([www.pacificresearch.org](http://www.pacificresearch.org)) warns that middle and upper-class suburbanites might need to reconsider whether their outstanding schools are in fact outstanding.

Authors Lance T. Izumi, Vicki E. Murray and Rachel S. Chaney focus their attention on California schools, but their work is valuable to anyone interested in real estate or education.

The single largest section of the book describes the academic state of what the authors call “underperforming” schools. First they identified “nonpoor schools,” or schools in which less than one-third of students participate in the school lunch program. Then in a crude but powerful test, they identified as underperforming any school that “had over 50 percent of students below proficiency in at least one grade level” on the state’s English or mathematics exam.

The result is “The Upscale Real Estate Guide to Underperforming Schools,” a pull-out feature of the book that lists 284 “underperforming” public schools, some with rather upscale demographic profiles.

Nearly all the schools on the list have a ZIP code in which the median home value is more than \$300,000. More than half have a value above \$500,000. One even has a median value of \$1.63 million. Clearly, many people pay lot of money for the opportunity to send their children to these schools.

The book contains narrative descriptions of famous and wealthy communities in which these schools reside. They include Silicon Valley; Burbank (home to NBC); Huntington Beach (known as “Surf City USA”) and several towns in wine-producing Sonoma County.

We read, for example, that the San Francisco Bay area city of San Mateo is home to Hillsdale High, which boasts a ZIP code where the median home price is \$867,000. Not even 8 percent of students are in the federal lunch program, yet only 40 percent of 11th-grade students are proficient in English. More troubling, performance on that test drops 27 points between the ninth and 11th grades.

The underperforming schools are found throughout the state, in both the more expensive coastal cities and the less expensive interior ones.

Political allegiances make no differences. Underperforming schools are found in “red” areas such as Orange County, in Southern California. They are also in the famously “blue”—and famously wealthy—San Francisco Bay area. By the way, those schools are not in poorer Oakland, but in prosperous Marin County, where George W. Bush lost twice, both times by a landslide.

Some schools on the list are in cities that host the state’s leading institutions of higher education, including Berkeley, San Diego, and Santa Cruz. Carlsbad and Chino are among the cities in which close to a quarter of the population has a graduate degree. In other words, these are not communities of struggling-to-survive families with minimal education.

In an illustration of the schizophrenic nature of school ratings, some of the schools on the underperforming list have been dubbed by the state as a “California Distinguished School.” One example is the Richard Gahr High School in Los Angeles County. Only 47 percent of ninth-grade students there are proficient in English. And don’t blame immigrants: only 6.5 percent of the students are “English-language learners.”

As with any study, there are some limitations to this book. The narratives read too much like a travel guide at times, even if they do show that famous cities can have weak schools. One sharp feature of the narratives is the interspersing of positive parent-written school reviews from the web site Great Schools ([www.greatschools.net](http://www.greatschools.net)). The proximity of warm words and cold, hard, facts is jarring.

I wish the book had put the real estate prices into perspective. California’s real estate prices are legendary, and I found nothing in the book to compare the home values of the selected districts to the state.

The online version of the book repeatedly mentions the “Upscale Real Estate Guide.” I had to rely on a web search to find it, however. As it turns out, a blogger had a link to the guide as a separate document, which is back on the Pacific Research site.

The book has other large sections that I haven't touched upon here, so there is much for policymakers and citizens alike to consider. The costs, both emotional and financial, that homeowners incur by getting into "good schools" may cause them to overestimate actual school performance. That can lead to a complacency that is harmful to us all, especially the children.