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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Worse Than You Think

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Proponents of educational choice tend to focus on the underprivileged, which is understandable given that low-income kids are overrepresented in failing inner-city public schools. But an emphasis on the plight of the poor can leave the impression that middle-class public school students are doing fine. And that would be a false impression, according to a new book-length study by the Pacific Research Institute, "Not as Good as You Think: Why the Middle-Class Needs School Choice."

Conventional wisdom holds that upscale communities tend to have "good" schools, and parents often buy homes in expensive neighborhoods so their kids have a shot at a decent public education. But the PRI study, which focused on California, found that in nearly 300 schools in middle-class and affluent neighborhoods, "less than half of the students in at least one grade level performed at proficiency in state math and English tests."

Many of these schools were located in the Golden State's toniest zip codes, places like Orange County, Silicon Valley and the beach communities of Los Angeles. In areas such as Newport Beach, Capistrano and Huntington Beach, where million-dollar houses are commonplace, researchers found more than a dozen schools where 50% to 80% of students weren't proficient in math at their grade level. In one Silicon Valley community where the median home goes for \$1.6 million, less than half of 10th and 11th graders scored at or above proficiency on the state English exam.

Schools serving middle-income kids are also doing a poor job of preparing them for higher education. Some 60% of freshmen in the California State University system need remedial courses. And it's not because they grew up in Watts. At Dos Pueblos High School in ritzy Santa Barbara, only 28% of high school juniors tested college-ready for English in 2006, slightly better than the 23% of students who did so at San Marin High School in Marin County, where the median home price recently hit \$1 million.

"Many middle-class parents don't think they have a stake in the school-choice debate," says Lance Izumi, the lead author of the study, in an interview. "They assume their schools are doing better than they are." In reality, these families would benefit from vouchers, tuition tax credits, charter schools and other educational options as surely as the inner-city single mom.

And the competitive pressure would help make the surrounding public schools better. "When you show people in these communities how their schools aren't doing so well, how they're not getting the bang for

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their buck," says Mr. Izumi, "they can begin to see how the debate over school choice affects them, too."

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