

## Why Do We Have Better Product Information on Sports Cars than We Do on Schools?

By Michael Strong, CEO, FLOW

*Car & Driver's* August 2006 issue features a six-page article comparing five different sports cars. The detailed descriptions include a host of technical information as well as sophisticated aesthetic judgments; the best thing about the Porsche 911 is "its organic nature, its ability to commune with its driver." The Jaguar XK convertible is "an easy car to underestimate. At first acquaintance it seems docile, mellow, and not at all likely to get in your face."

Both public and private K-12 education typically represents an investment of \$100,000 or so over thirteen years, a sticker price higher than that associated with any of the sports cars reviewed so lovingly. Although I would describe certain schools in similar terms, "the best thing about Athenaeum School is its organic nature, its ability to commune with your child" or "The Emerson School is an easy school to underestimate. At first acquaintance it seems docile, mellow, and not at all likely to surprise with its academic performance," there is no glossy publication in education analogous to *Car & Driver*. Why do we have better product information on sports cars than we do on schools?

As an educator who specializes in individualized education, it surprises me that more parents don't shop around for schools for their children. I am familiar with numerous cases in which students who had academic, emotional, or behavioral problems in one context flourished in another. A student who failed 7th grade science transferred to a school at which he was allowed to take AP Biology in grade 8 and achieved a "4" on the AP test, a score adequate to get credit most colleges. A student who wrote a few halting sentences at a previous school is now writing essays. A student who hid under desks at one school became a calm, self-possessed young man by means of a different school.

Howard Gardner, the Harvard cognitive psychologist, has become famous for his theory that there exist seven or so "multiple intelligences." There are six billion kinds of intelligence. I know a man with an IQ of 90 who is a respected history professor at a small liberal arts college. Temple Grandin, an autistic woman, earned a Ph.D. and has become the foremost designer of cattle feedlots in the U.S. Had Einstein, who spoke poorly until the age of 9, been a student in our schools he most likely would have been placed in special education classes. Winston Churchill, a notorious troublemaker in school, may have been diagnosed with ADD and given Ritalin.

The notion that one kind of education fits all is simply absurd. Special Ed, regular, and "gifted" education in no way exhausts the categories of learners. Brain researchers estimate that the number of potential synaptical connections in the human brain exceeds the number of molecules in the universe. The human brain is the most complex known entity in the universe. We have thousands of different kinds of shoes; shouldn't there be thousands of different kinds of education? Our minds clearly differ more than do our feet.

As an educator who is acutely aware of this radically individuality, sometimes I feel a moralizing

impulse: Why don't more parents shop for an optimal educational experience for their children? Of course, some parents do, which is why educational options are increasing in the U.S. In addition, however, public school education professionals, who have a vested interest in supporting the system, encourage a dependency on their "expert" opinion. A procedure exists: a child with special needs is given an individual education plan (IEP), which purportedly will take care of that child's special needs. Instead of shopping, most parents who feel as if a child's needs aren't being met arrange for an IEP meeting.

But for the most part, economics lead to the dearth of educational shopping. Housing is the largest single expense in most household budgets. The relative quality of one's neighborhood is critical to the well being of one's children. Moreover, a housing purchase is the most important financial investment most families make. As a consequence, families shop for neighborhoods. Since better public schools usually correlate with better neighborhoods, it is rational for parents to invest in the best possible residential neighborhood and enroll their child in the local public school rather than live in a less desirable neighborhood and pay tuition at a private school.

Most importantly, there are limited options in the kinds of schools available. The rise of magnet and alternative schools within public school districts increased options somewhat. But often demand exceeds supply for these options, and districts are slow to enlarge successful programs. Charter schools were a greater hope for expanding the range of educational options, but in many states their potential to do so has been hobbled by compromise legislation. Many states still limit the number of charter schools allowed or have charter laws that allow existing school systems to veto the launch of potentially competitive charter schools.

Finally, most existing public and private schools adhere to standard curricula, teaching methods, etc.; true alternatives remain rare. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has essentially mandated nation-wide that charter schools conform to a fairly narrow conception of education. All public and charter schools must show Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on standardized tests that substantially dictate what must be taught each year in each school. In addition, NCLB mandates that charter schools hire "highly qualified teachers," a requirement that ensures that conventional teachers with conventional education degrees will continue to dominate the field of education. Most private schools rely on the standard operating system of public school curricula, teacher training, testing, etc. because it is costly and difficult to create everything anew from scratch.<sup>1</sup>

Minimally regulated educational vouchers would allow dramatically greater educational diversity to come into being. As the headmaster of a high-end progressive private school for gifted students, I became aware of a loose network of wealthy, geographically mobile parents who search the nation for adequate schools for their children, and move to the particular locale that has a school suitable for their child. Other parents solve the problem of a lack of adequate educational options by creating a school for their child; this is a tremendously challenging task, analogous to building a sports car from scratch. Many parents home school because adequate education options simply don't exist.

Despite the limited range of choice available through charter schools, their existence will

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Strong, "Why We Don't Have a Silicon Valley of Education," Edspresso, [http://www.edspresso.com/2006/05/why\\_we\\_dont\\_have\\_a\\_silicon\\_val.htm](http://www.edspresso.com/2006/05/why_we_dont_have_a_silicon_val.htm).

encourage greater awareness among parents that one size does not fit all. As more parents begin the process of researching the best school for their child, more parents will learn the extent to which different educators have very different approaches. The “Which school are you going to choose for your child?” conversation will no longer take place only among those parents with money, but also among lower income parents. Increasingly parents will realize that each of their children might be best placed in a different kind of school.

Although local parenting publications across the country provide some reporting on school differentiation, as the number of parents who shop for schools increases and differentiated brand-name school chains come into being (KIPP and Edison are only the beginning), the level of reporting on schools will become increasingly sophisticated. At present, one could hardly compare the level of sophistication of consumer information on schools with that available to buy a computer, a camera, or an auto. But gradually, as the size of the market increases, as educational product differentiation grows, and as a greater number of brand-name educational products exist across geographical regions, it will become cost-effective for a publisher to provide truly independent, in-depth analysis of particular brand-name schools.

With enough educational freedom, eventually we will see a "Car and Driver" or "PC User" magazine of education. The rise of such publications will result in a feedback mechanism that will result in a more nuanced and competitive education market, ultimately resulting in higher product quality and greater product differentiation. School chains will compete to win reviews such as those now won by Porsches and Jaguars celebrating a school's “ability to commune with your child” or reminding the discerning connoisseur that a modest-seeming chain is “an easy school to underestimate.” Once there is public recognition and evaluation of the non-measurable aspects of schools, parents will begin to appreciate that they are making a choice far more important than that involved in buying a sports car. Our culture will begin entering a virtuous upward circle, in which K-12 education is driven by the global competition to offer the best preparation for lifelong happiness and well being for your child rather than by special interests and political infighting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Strong, Edspresso.com, “Legalizing Markets in Happiness and Well-Being,” [http://www.edspresso.com/2006/07/legalizing\\_markets\\_in\\_happines.htm](http://www.edspresso.com/2006/07/legalizing_markets_in_happines.htm).