



8030 Y

Alvord, TX
Alvord Gazette
Circ. 585

OCT 2 - 2003

Murder and Rape: the Legacy of Our Schools?

Parents and Children Need Safe Choices, Not More Promises

by Michael Quinn Sullivan

A young teenage girl was recently raped just blocks from the Texas Capitol. That's unspeakably horrible. What's worse? She was raped in the bathroom of her public high school.

Simply an isolated incident? I wish that were true. Just a few months ago, at the same school, another girl was murdered by her ex-boyfriend. In the school. During the school day.

Could these be incidents isolated to just one school? Absolutely not. Many of our public schools are dangerous places; war zones with mascots. While hard to ignore a murder or a rape, a great many assaults get chalked up simply as "discipline" problems, rather than criminal acts.

But even according to the Texas Education Agency website, some 100,645 incidents of school violence occurred in 2002. Those incidents range from "criminal mischief" and "public lewdness" to assaults on students and teachers.

There are at least 100,000 victims whose lives have been deeply scarred. How many students are walking the halls, worried they will be next? How is that fear impacting their studies? Their future?

The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires states to let children escape from schools labeled as "persistently dangerous." But that is not good enough. The Austin school where the girl was recently raped is a "safe" school based on the guidelines, despite community agreement it is unsafe.

At least two families in Austin know the school is terrifyingly unsafe.

The laws of Texas consign a great many children to a life of fear, with no hope of escape. The state forces children in bad neighborhoods to stick with schools that under-perform academically while failing to protect them physically.

For far too many disadvantaged parents, the issue is not whether their child is getting a good education at the public school. They wonder if their child will survive the school day unharmed. How many more must die before children are allowed to escape?

When I read of these horrors, the decision my wife and I made to put our daughters in a private school is painfully reaffirmed. But we have a choice; while not

wealthy, we are able to scrape enough together to pay both our taxes and the private school tuition.

For a great many children and their parents, there is no choice. The child can attend the dangerous school down the street, or... The child can attend the dangerous school down the street. There is a third option, of course: the child can drop out.

Even in the safest of schools, there are children who are not safe. When a child fears for her safety, she will not learn. When a child sees a friend murdered or raped on campus, his ability to focus on academics is diminished.

How many economically disadvantaged parents would choose to let their daughters remain in a school that has seen two girls raped or murdered on campus in less than 12 months? Not many.

Parents must be given options and choices. Real choices. But don't expect the public school bureaucracy and the teacher unions to allow it without a fight. No matter how dangerous the school, academic choice is not an option they will consider.

School choice ensures parents have the option to put their children in a school meeting their needs, academically and physically. True choice enables parents not only to demand safety, but empowers them - through the threat of lost revenues - to vote with their feet when the school doesn't change.

This is the point when the apologists for public schools will argue we need "good kids" and "good families" in these dangerous schools so the culture can be improved. They will say we cannot "let" these good kids abandon the schools.

Sorry, but the life of my child is more valuable than a social experiment. No child should be left in failing, dangerous schools to appease anyone's social conscience.

How many more children must be harmed? How many more kids, attending school in sight of the Texas Capitol dome, must be assaulted, terrorized and harassed? How many more families will have to suffer until lawmakers given Texans true school choice? (Michael Quinn Sullivan is the vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, non-partisan research institution based in Austin, TX.)