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## The Issue of Race for Private-School Students of Color

## by Sharon Cravanas Johns

Over the last ten years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of students of color enrolling in private schools. The major reasons for this shift are the increase in the number of middle class families of color; the sad state of inner-city public schools; and the perception that attendance at a private high school assures a direct pipeline into prestigious colleges. While many of these students have certainly benefited from attending some well- respected, selective college preparatory institutions, it has become clear that most have had to make some serious sacrifices in order to survive in such elite environments. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and certain Asian groups are greatly under represented at the large majority of independent schools. Thus, the issue of race is unavoidable.

How, then, does one describe the experience of the student of color in a private school? Broad general statements are unavoidable. Some kids thrive in the environment. Some are never able to feel "at home." Some enjoy being the minority with so much to teach their classmates. Others crave a critical mass of students of color with whom they have similar life experiences and traditions in common. Few, however, deny that their experience is very different from that of their White classmates.

To be one of a small number of students of color at an independent school is to be truly a "minority" student. This is often the first time that a child has been made to feel he different. We all know that adolescence is a period when young people want to belong to some group. The last thing they want to do is stand out. A "non traditional" private-school kid does just that. The student looks different, and often comes from a different set of life experiences. Coupled with the frequent misconception held by many members of her school community, and oftentimes by the student herself that the only way she got admitted to the school was through affirmative action, this child can often feel an inordinate amount of discomfort. We parents are stuck wondering whether or not this enriching experience is worth the emotional toll it is taking on some of our children.

Racial issues rear their heads in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways at private schools. There are fewer teachers of color to

act as role models or simply to help the student navigate the sometimes alien waters of a private school. The fact that the curriculum rarely includes contributions of non-White cultures makes the lack of teachers of color even more of a problem. Frequently, students of color complain about being put in the position of having to represent their entire race during class discussion. An African American student in Oregon recently told me that he had been asked, in class, by his American History teacher, what he felt Malcolm X really meant with "by ANY means necessary." The student lamented: "How am I supposed to understand and translate what has been happening to my people for the last century?"

Private schools have a very different culture from most public schools. They are usually much smaller and more intimate (few local private high schools enroll more than 300 students). Thus, for many, the school community becomes an extended family. Teachers often know much more about their students' lives than most minority families are comfortable sharing. Often, with honest naiveté, teachers will claim not to even notice a child's skin color. "He's just another one of my kids," they will explain. While it is ironic that most young people don't want to stick out, few students of color wish to have their skin color or culture disregarded.

As the students grow up, social and racial issues become intertwined. The parties become racially segregated, and unless there is a core of students of the same race, dating can be problematic. The student who is in the minority usually has to look outside of his school for a satisfying social life, or he begins to experiment with inter racial dating. It is usually the boys who are able to date outside of their race. Generally, high school girls of color are not asked out by White boys, due in large part to peer pressure on both sides.

There is no question that, in spite of the problems addressed earlier, many families feel that the benefits of attending an independent school outweigh the drawbacks. The situation is certainly getting better at many of the schools, and to the credit of concerned school administrators and teachers and vigilant parents, many independent schools are working hard to become a comfortable and nurturing environment for all of their students.

A group of independent school students of color was asked to name the changes that would be necessary for them to enroll their own children there someday. The following is a list of their suggestions:

- Increase the number of teachers of color (unanimous first suggestion).
- Increase the number of students of color.
- Make the curriculum more inclusive.
- Be clear on why the school wants to be more diverse.
- Train the teachers and administrators to appreciate difference.

They also felt it imperative that any student of color who attends private school have a strong sense of herself and her culture and that she have a very strong support system at home

It may be that younger students of color become aware of race at an earlier age if they attend independent schools. Clearly, most of the issues pertaining to race are not unique to independent schools. Fortunately, many of those students who have been part of an ethnic minority at a private college preparatory school have taught as much, if not more than, their teachers. They enter college well-prepared academically, and they are often wise beyond their years when it comes to social and racial dynamics. Only they will know whether or not it was worth the struggle.

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