

How to Make or Break Your Child's Future

Shante had a lot of things going for her as she finished middle school. She was bright, attractive and talented. Her parents, Glenn and Sheri, had worked hard to ensure she could have a better life than they had experienced growing up. But both were uneasy with the public high school that Shante was zoned for in Prince George's County. Although it's the highest income majority-black county in the United States, it had a high school dropout rate more than 10 points higher than neighboring Montgomery County.

Glenn and Sheri both understood that high school would make or break Shante's future. These strategic years are when good kids could go bad. They had seen it happen too often to children of friends and relatives: a studious, ambitious kid fell in with the wrong crowd and caved into peer pressure with bad decisions. Shante had a bright future, but like other kids in her neighborhood, her margin for error was slim.

A turning point came when her family attended the Riverdale Baptist High School graduation ceremony for the college-bound daughter of some family friends. As they listened to the commencement speeches, they learned that 100 percent of the senior class had graduated on time, 98 percent were headed to four-year colleges and the other 2 percent to military service. They looked at the students receiving their diplomas: neatly dressed, respectful, and enthusiastic about their futures.

That night, Glenn and Sheri agreed that even if they had to eat peanut butter and jelly for lunch every day for the next four years, they were going to send Shante to Riverdale Baptist. And while they did end up getting a break from PBJ now and then, it was a sacrifice. They put off buying new

furniture, and drove used cars that sometimes didn't have heat, all while reminding Shante to make the most of her education.

Cell phone video gave their family and the nation a real window into the chaos that reigns in many of our failing public schools. In May, a video surfaced of a substitute teacher in Prince George's County beating unruly students with his belt. The same month, an unnamed female teacher was fired from her Detroit high school for trying to break up a violent brawl that threatened to turn deadly. In another widely circulated video, a student in a Chicago high school shouted at her teacher above the deafening commotion: "I want an education! You get paid, don't you?"

As I have written before, my father made a very similar decision to Glenn and Sheri when he decided to send me to the most rigorous private school in our area instead of the public school I was zoned for. In that spirit, my wife and I sacrificed considerably to send our daughters to private high school as well. For us, the quality of the education our children received was always more important than the kind of car we drove or the square footage of our house. But many other parents don't have that option.

The important things kids learn in school go far beyond academic markers. They refine their vocabulary, learn to relate to authority figures and subconsciously absorb a multitude of behavioral norms. These skills are not only vital to succeeding in college, but also to obtaining and holding down a job.

In fact, a study published in the journal *Education* reveals that ninth grade may be the most important year in determining a student's future. As psychoanalyst Dr. Linda Stern told *The Atlantic*:

"Students entering high school—just at the time brains are in

flux—still have the propensity to be impulsive and are prone to making mistakes. They are therefore experimental and trying to separate and might try substances that interfere with the normal developmental process. Put all that together with raging hormones the normal academic pressures, and meeting a whole new group to be judged by.”

Shante not only graduated sixth in her class at Riverdale Baptist, but was offered full-tuition scholarships to seven different universities. After earning her degree in psychology, she was accepted to a fellowship at George Washington University where she obtained a master’s in special education. After marrying and having children, she obtained her second master’s degree in applied psychology.

How can we ensure that all parents can make the choice that Glenn and Sheri did for Shante? This summer, Nevada became the first state to offer universal school choice: it allows every single public school student in the state an education savings account so that parents can customize their children’s education as they see fit. I hope other states will follow Nevada’s example and put all parents—regardless of income—in control of their children’s future.

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