

Contra Costa Sun

A surprising desire to go 'private'

By Jackie Burrell
STAFF WRITER

The Sphinx, the Bermuda Triangle, footing the bill for private school when there are perfectly good public schools right there -- at least one of the great mysteries of life has some answers.

At Saklan, Seven Hills, Orinda Academy, Bentley and other East Bay private schools, a significant number of families are opting out of the public school system in favor of high-priced, intensive education programs. They hail from Berkeley, Oakland, West Contra Costa and other troubled districts, but they also come from Lamorinda and Walnut Creek, home to some of the state's top-ranked public schools.

"To me, it's not about what's good enough. It's about what's the best I can give them early on," says Paul Felton, a Saklan Valley School parent. "Traditionally in America, you save for college. I front load my investment."

That investment is a hefty one. Private school tuition tends to run around \$16,000 a year. Put your child in private school from kindergarten to senior year, and the tab can run into the hundreds of thousands. Why do it?

Private school parents point to the small class sizes, the individual attention and community feel of a small campus. They praise the multiple study halls, staffed by teachers and designed to keep everyone on target. They emphasize the enrichment programs and foreign language courses. And they love those uniforms -- parents do, anyway.

Felton was deeply troubled by what he saw as a decades-long decline in California public education. His two older children had gone through the public school system in Orinda, but he wanted to try something else for his youngest.

"You can certainly get a satisfactory elementary education in Orinda, and Miramonte is a terrific institution. Public high schools in Lamorinda are clearly first rate," he says. "(We decided to) give Saklan a chance for kindergarten, first grade. It was so exceptionally good for our daughter, it really made us into ardent believers."

Unlike those who moved to Lamorinda for the schools, Ed and Caren Rice moved to Orinda 10 years ago to get away from San Francisco. They were looking for warmer weather and a convenient BART commute. It was not until their young son was approaching kindergarten age that they began thinking about schools.

Caren worried that her quiet son might get lost in the crowds at a conventional public school, and that California classrooms can hold as many as 38 to 40 students. Orinda's K-3 classes hold no more than 20 students, and fourth and fifth grade classes run at 30 or less.

Caren also worried that although Orinda has one of the top-ranked districts in the state, the state's national rankings are so low that the numbers lose meaning, she says. "They're

constantly being tested to push those scores up. Let the kids learn," she says. "I don't like that the public schools mainstream (special needs students). It takes time away from the normal kids."

For Pleasant Hill parent Karina Kasper, watching as her child runs off to explore the brand new, \$600,000 playground at Seven Hills School, it is the warmly personal, village-rearing-children atmosphere. When she is stuck in traffic on the Bay Bridge, she says she knows her child is not waiting out at the curb.

"There are as many reasons (to go to private school) as there are people," says Kasper. "There's so much more diversity (than I expected). You'd think there'd be cookie cutter imagery, but you interface with so many people."

That personal touch cannot be discounted. Lafayette parent Bett Tokar notes that she has both the Saklan middle school director's cell and the math teacher's home phone numbers, and that the headmaster is out front every morning during drop-off.

"Stanley's a fabulous school, so it's definitely a hard decision," she says. "But the best investment you can make is in education for yourself or your children."

Plus, there's the issue of school uniforms. They banish Abercrombie from the Visa bills and save both energy and time in the morning rush. Laughing, she adds, "It's not a cheap date to be in private school, but the uniforms are worth the tuition."

Contra Costa

QUIN

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1993

SERVING LAFAYETTE, MORAGA AND ORINDA CIVIL LIFE

A surprising desire to go 'private'

■ Despite living in areas that offer stellar public schools, many local parents opt for something different

By Jackie Burrell
staff writer

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INSIDE
Alternatives for families opting out of the public school system in search of something different. See pages 4-5

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See ALTERNATIVES, Page 4

Alternatives

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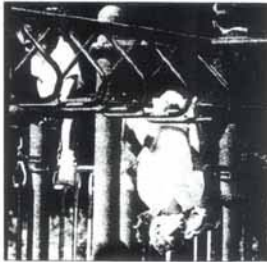
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SAKLAN VALLEY SCHOOL students play on a jungle gym during recess. Saklan is one of many local private schools that make up the Bay Area's private school community.