

At private schools, money rules

Offend a donor or disagree with the head of school, and ability and educational issues suddenly take a backseat.

By William C. Kashatus

Patsy Tollin, the second-grade teacher recently dismissed by the Baldwin School, allegedly to appease a wealthy couple, is lucky. She enjoyed a 22-year career on the Main Line before she was sent packing.

There are many others who were dispatched much earlier in their careers for challenging the authority of an administrator or wealthy parent. Some were forced to find employment outside teaching, their chosen profession.



William C. Kashatus

How do I know? I taught at some of the area's most prestigious private schools for 15 years. I have known many wonderful parents and heads of schools. I also knew a few who placed their own agendas ahead of the school's mission.

Baldwin is one of the area's most respected private schools. Like the other institutions that make up the prestigious Inter-Academic League, Baldwin's reputation for scholastic rigor and its successful matriculation rates to the nation's top colleges and universities make it an appealing choice for affluent families seeking to gain a competitive edge for their children.

At the same time, these schools are forced to operate like businesses, competing with each other for students, generating exposure to raise funds, and trying to increase their endowments while finding ways to cut escalating costs. They tend to define "growth" by the number of facilities built, the size of the enrollment, and the diversity of curricular and extra-curricular offerings.

Instead of shaping the moral and intellectual fiber of students by making them and their families accountable to its educational mission and policies, the private school has become a kind of shopping mall for the most affluent families, one in which the "customers"

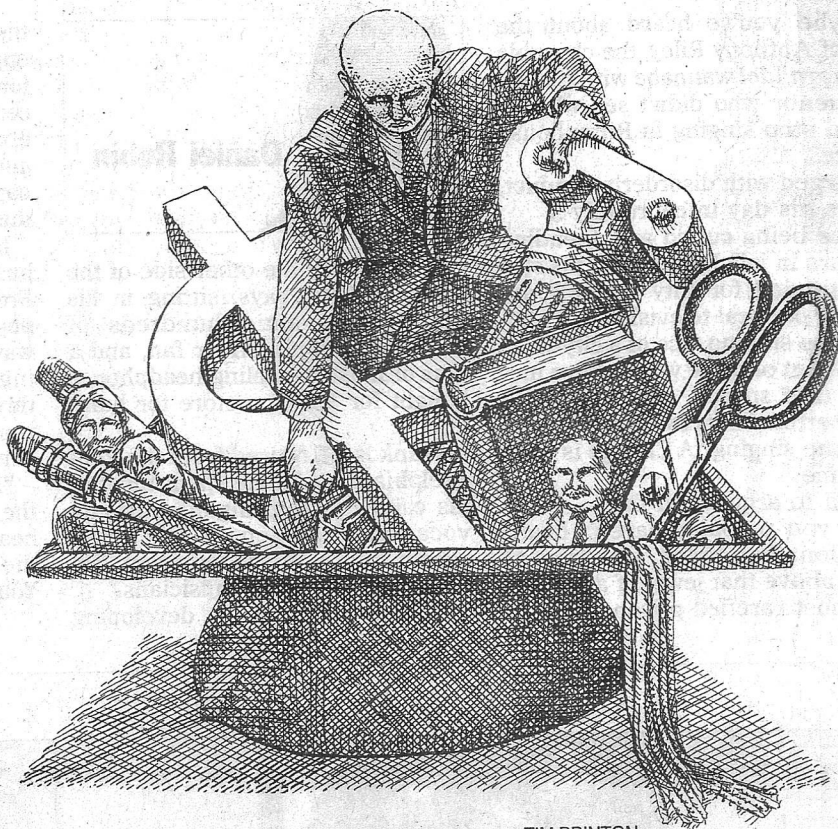
are "always right."

If there's a dispute between a wealthy parent and a teacher, the head of school, increasingly a fund-raiser, often buckles under the economic pressure and sides with the parent rather than the teacher.

Predictably, it appears, when Tollin's teaching style — so admired for more than two decades — displeased one wealthy family, she was dismissed. The alternative would be to risk losing a multimillion-dollar donation for a major building project at the school.

One of my former colleagues, a director of college counseling, was relieved of that responsibility because the child of a wealthy donor was not admitted to her top choice. Another colleague was fired for openly questioning an administrator's decision at a school that prided itself on "open dialogue." I had other colleagues who were afraid to voice their opinions for fear of retribution by the head of school.

I've never been very good at learning from the "mistakes" of others, though. So, when I challenged the decisionmaking practice of one head of school on moral grounds, I was stripped of my responsibility for coordinating a major initiative at the school and blackballed by the head.



TIM BRINTON

Although I chose to resign as a matter of personal integrity, I would have been fired if I hadn't.

Private schools demand unconditional loyalty of teachers, but do not always give them the same courtesy. Too often, disagreement is viewed as disloyalty instead of the kind of candid dialogue that is necessary for constructive growth.

Sadly, the students are the ones who lose out. Sooner or later, they understand the difference between preaching integrity and modeling it.

The ones whom they remember long after their school days are over are those who "practiced what they preached," not the cowards who took the money and ran.

Tollin is now seeking vindication in the courts. I wish her luck.

If she wins, the victory might force private schools to be more accountable to their educational missions, rather than to the affluent donors who too often influence the running of the schools and the administrators who pretend to be educators.

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