

RIISE Roadmap *to* Independent School Success & Beyond

Installation 1

HOW *this*
UNIQUE
EDUCATIONAL
JOURNEY
can benefit
FAMILIES *of*
COLOR



by Gina Parker Collins

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FOREWORD BY ANDRÉ ROBERT LEE

I believe in private school education. I have witnessed how this type of education can open the doors to numerous opportunities. I have seen firsthand how a private school education can help a student and his or her family achieve their best. I have also seen individuals and families fall by the wayside during the journey. There is little time to point fingers and play the blame game. It is a fact that inequity and injustice exist in this world so we must study the roadmap.

For so long there was no guidance. How did one navigate a system that was opaque by design? Parents and students were frustrated because no one wanted to admit that the process was daunting. As often is necessary we have to figure it out for ourselves. RIISE has been our torchbearer for nearly 10 years.

In 1989, I was a freshman in my private high school. I loved practically every minute of the experience but there were those moments when I believed everyone else in the room understood a process I did not. Sometimes it appeared as if there were numerous secrets I was not privy to. Today, I have witnessed many families experience the same confusion as they try to navigate the private school world. They have hard and frightening questions. What is legacy? Which school is the best for my child? Am I causing harm to my child by placing her in a community where so few look like her? Do we even belong? We need a community to discuss these issues. This is how we, as families of color, are collectively successful in navigating uncharted territories.

When I entered the “ivory tower” neither my family nor I knew of any formal support groups. At the time, the National Association of Independent School’s People of Color Conference was in its first year. There was gentle acknowledgement that something had to be done to support the students and families of color and change their experiences. Now in 2015, there are numerous options. The struggle is no longer a whispered conversation in the school parking lot. There are organizations, committees, affinity groups,

movies, books, and most importantly focused support for families as they navigate the process.

You are not a guest in a stranger's house when and if you choose an independent school education. Your family belongs wherever you choose to educate your children. RIISE embraces this notion and our community with excellence and grace. RIISE does not talk down to audiences, it engages and lifts them up.

André Robert Lee

Director of *The Prep School Negro*

Producer of *I'm Not A Racist... Am I?*



OUR STORY

Over a decade ago, my husband and I began to look at the educational landscape for our then 2-year-old daughter. Our search for excellence in education that included resources that would set the foundation for an exceptional future, quickly ruled out our neighborhood public schools. Even a subsequent move to a suburban neighborhood, with a new son in tow, didn't increase our faith in our local public schools. We wanted more.

As we assessed the state of public education and looked back on the pitfalls of our own past educational experiences, our anxieties heightened. I attended both private parochial and public school, K-12; my husband attended public school exclusively, K-12. We both experienced an education that taught to a test, had over-crowded classrooms, under-supported teachers, and a lack of school safety. Once we began to look at our alternatives, we were assured by friends and advocates that a private independent school experience would be different. This assurance, along with our children's potential, our family values, and our faith in God's will for us, fueled our curiosity and commitment to provide the very best in education for our children – one that would nurture and challenge them.

We were blessed to find more guidance as we made our way through the many steps and expectations of applying to a private independent school which included: completing applications, scheduling admissions testing, going on interviews and attending countless events. And, there were other considerations like the financial, social and emotional investments required to not only apply, but later enroll, if accepted. To meet these demands, we prayed

and walked with a cultural confidence that continues to serve us to this day. Nine years later, with two children, we are successfully navigating a private independent school education.

But the successes have not been without challenges. For instance, there was little to no visible diversity in my children's kindergarten class. In fact, my son was the only black student in his class from kindergarten through fifth grade. As the school earnestly worked on diversity recruitment my children would benefit from Students of Color Society (SOCS), an affinity group supported by the school that brought together students of color across grades in the Lower School providing an environment of diversity that was missing. The affinity group was invaluable and offered my children a sense of inclusivity that they would need to be socially and emotionally successful in school. As diversity has grown at my children's school, so has SOCS, becoming an important resource for students and families.

Things were not easy for my husband and me either, at first. We also encountered settings where there was a clear racial and socioeconomic disparity. Simply walking into a room where you were visibly not represented was unsettling. Morning parent association meetings, fundraisers, cocktail events in uber-wealthy residences only heightened isolation for many parents. These moments of feeling like we did not belong were offset once we became involved in our school community through parent affinity groups like Parents of Color (POC). Affinity and networking groups became increasingly important as we established a sense of belonging. It helped us become more active in the larger school community and elevated our collective voice in support of our children's educational journey. The networks also provided our school with dynamic and valuable resources to elevate equity and social justice platforms along with racial and socioeconomic diversity. While the successes are not void of challenges, our passion for education is being fully realized.

Our son and daughter's educational journey inspired the creation of Resources In Independent School Education (RIISE), a national lifestyle organization that builds bridges between families of color and the culture of private independent schools. RIISE resides at a dynamic intersection where access to a private independent school education and the empowerment of school choice for

families of color exists. This guidebook contextualizes school choice and sheds light on the history of private education along with the culture of private independent schools. The intention is to create awareness and curiosity among families of color so that they seriously consider the possibilities of this educational environment that is ripe with opportunities. Let this guidebook help you determine if your family is poised to partner with a private independent school for an exceptional experience in education.

POWER OF CHOICE

It is a parental right to be in control of how we educate our children. Gaining that control requires that we thoroughly explore our options so that we are empowered to make a well-informed decision. Choosing the right school allows us to be intentional about our children's education, aligning it with our personal values and expectations, and that is powerful! It is as if we are the conductor of a train in charge of the destination and the journey.

The distinctions are many between a private and public school education. And still, there are further contrasts within each.

Independent Education Terms

Private Independent School - Non-public education, tuition based, admissions process, guided by board of trustees and National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)

Types

Day School - Non-residential

Boarding School - Residential

Single Gender School - All girl or all boy

Coed School - Both genders

Traditional School - Perceived as more rigid curriculum and cultural guidelines

Progressive School - Perceived as more flexible curriculum and cultural guidelines

*note, some schools are a combination of both

Religious School - Religious affiliation

Nonsectarian School - No religious affiliation

Lower, Middle, Upper Schools - Divisions among grades Pre-K through

12

Private School - Non-public education, generally tuition based, not guided by NAIS

Types

Religious - Religious affiliation

Cultural - Cultural affiliation

Public School - Public education, non -tuition based, generally zoned based on residency, no application process guided by Department of Education (DOE)

Other

Specialized School - Application process, guided by DOE as secondary schools with enhanced coverage of certain subjects

Charter School - Application process, independently managed, seen as alternative to public schools, guided by a charter from the DOE

For example, our children happen to go to a co-ed, Pre-K through Grade 12, country day school. “Country” because it sits on a large campus surrounded by trees and “day” because students live at home and do not board at school. My children’s school can be considered both traditional and progressive in its approach to curriculum and school culture. It is non-sectarian because it has no religious affiliation. However, there are just as many families who will choose to send their child to an all-girl grade 5-12, traditional school in a city, while others will choose to start an independent school education in 9th grade at a boarding school. The choices here are endless as families search for a “good fit.”

HISTORY

Surprisingly, private schools are the foundation of the American educational system. “In the infancy of the United States of America, schooling for young people, such as it was, was provided by small private schools, not public schools. Education in colonial days was quite stratified. Boys learned core subjects such as reading and math. Girls learned the domestic arts. Only white children received an education until slavery was abolished.”

(<http://www.boardingschoolreview.com/articles/78> Date retrieved, June 2, 2014) As the political and social climate in our country evolved so did the variety of private educational institutions. For example, during Jim Crow, many black children were taught in private schools by black educators within their own communities.

Historically, a private education has been a province of the rich, white, privileged class, hinging on cost and competition, therefore making it exclusive. Yet, families of color, regardless of their educational or socioeconomic backgrounds, should not be discouraged. As independent schools develop 21st century global citizens and leaders, they are also valuing and recruiting for racial and socioeconomic diversity more than ever.

A SNAPSHOT

When you visit most independent schools, it is clear that families of color are among the numerical minority. The following statistics and empirical studies offer a glimpse into the racial make-up of independent schools.

According to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), the total enrollment of students of color in independent schools (day and boarding) is 29 percent, (6.3 percent African American; 4.4 percent Hispanic American; 8.3 percent Asian-American; 7 percent Multiracial American; 0.3 percent Native American; 1.3 percent Pacific Islander; and 1.4 percent Middle Eastern American). The average classroom has 15 students, which means that about four students may be students of color.

Here is the breakdown of faculty and staff of color at U.S. independent schools: 13.2 percent are faculty; 11.1 percent are administrators; 16.5 percent are instructional support; and 27 percent “other staff.”

It is also no secret that private independent schools have some of the highest tuitions in the nation. The national average median tuition for independent day schools is \$22,000 per year with boarding school median averaging \$50,000. These costs clearly rival some college tuitions, but in talking to some of our independent school parents and thought leaders they all say that the cost is quite worth it. The resources provided to students are often described as “priceless” because the long-term investments being made offer academic excellence, plus unrivaled opportunities and networks for the future. The annual total expense at a day school is \$22,260 per student, and at boarding school, \$64,182 per student.

By the Numbers

2

Median number of students per computer

247

Median number of square footage per student ratio

15

Median average class size

8.6

Median student / full time teacher equivalence ratio

Source: At-A-Glance-NAIS, 2013-14

However priceless the educational experience may be, the reality is that tuition is a huge investment on the part of the family and depending on socioeconomics, this investment can come from a place of abundance or

sacrifice. According to NAIS, on average, 20 percent of students receive financial aid.

In RIISE's blog series "Funding of an Independent School Education," Sheila Hicks, Director Middle School Admissions & Financial Aid at Riverdale Country School, was asked about financial aid and the stigma often associated with it. Here's what she had to say:

"Independent schools need financial aid. It allows us to have the students and the families at our school who are the best fit, without relying on each of those families to also be in a financial situation to pay full tuition. Without financial aid we would certainly have a decline in the diversity of perspectives that make up our parent and student bodies and we would miss out on some real gems.

Our schools would suffer, as would the remaining students who would be in much less diverse (socioeconomically, racially, geographically, etc.) schools. In a search for excellence, it is imperative that we have diversity in our schools- thus we need financial aid. I also think that quite a few independent school decision makers believe in the transformative power of education and the social missions that our schools have to develop the next generation of leaders and change agents. We can imagine the possibilities that helping a family afford a Riverdale education might open for the student, the family, and the community and we think about how the experience of our schools paired with a variety of backgrounds might add up to wonderful things. Look no further than some of the independent school alums from more modest backgrounds who we all want to claim- former students like Wes Moore or Deval Patrick make all independent schools proud."

THE MINDSET

My family and I strive to positively embrace an independent school lifestyle with a mindset that values our cultural and economic capital, along with that of others in our school community. This perspective also embraces the opportunity to unpack race and class, helping us to balance the privileges this educational lifestyle offers. This mindset somehow helps to build trust and authenticity on this powerful journey.

Independent schools challenge students to rigorously unpack, deconstruct, and synthesize academically, while also challenging their level of social intelligence. As parents, we should recognize this challenge as an opportunity to not only support our children's academic, social, and emotional development, but our own by becoming active through parent affinity groups and associations, along with outside networks of like-minded families.

Some parents may find that private independent schools struggle to achieve racial and economic equity, however there are clear conversations and resourced efforts by schools to represent the diversity of the world that they are a part of. Anti-bias education, community outreach, increases in tuition assistance, and school partnerships with networks like RIISE, are evidence of these efforts.

BENEFITS

Academic rigor, small class sizes, inspiring educators, safe and stimulating environments, and extended resources are among the many benefits offered by most independent schools. Digging deeper reveals even more impactful benefits:

- A secure educational environment which fosters intellectual risk-taking and develops confident students who communicate effectively.
- Ongoing faculty development which encourages visionary teaching, creating dynamic learning experiences for our children.
- Administrative accessibility which motivates parents and students to actively participate in helping to shape the school community.
- The racial, social, and economic disparities at many independent schools create opportunities to engage in important equity and social justice work.
- Leadership development engrained in many school philosophies and curricula gives students the chance to navigate complex environments which exercise problem-solving skills.
- School communities offer casual and intentional exposure to influential people which can foster powerful networks.

“Amazing education – superior to anything else you will receive.”

**- Jason Caldwell, Director of Admissions,
Horace Mann School**

HOPE & REALITY

The reality is that independent schools are very selective and acceptance is not guaranteed. But, for families of color who choose to apply and enroll, if accepted, do so because they feel the investment is worth the opportunity. Many consider this opportunity a chance to create a future full of hope and promise for their children.

RIISE conducted an instant poll among a diverse group of parents of color asking them to complete the following sentence, “Independent School education means _____.”

Responses included:

Safe schools

Rigorous education

Inspired educators

Intellectual risk taking

Abundant resources

Robust college acceptance rates

Leadership development

Exposure to broad opportunities

Gateway to access

Change agency

There are many interpretations of what this educational lifestyle can offer. All of them are forward-thinking, and have the potential to lay a foundation to help ensure stronger family legacies. Envisioning the hope and promise for our children is a large part of where this journey begins. So where do hope and reality intersect?

BALANCE

The intersection of hope and reality can reside in achieving balance, which between the academic and social landscapes, requires that families be in-tune with their child's social and emotional development while enrolled in independent schools. Delia Farquharson, LCSW, RIISE Social and Emotional Advisor, states, "As both a parent of independent school children and a social worker, the most important consideration for me is how emotionally prepared is the child to deal with the new situation?" Because children of color are among the numerical minority, Farquharson asks, "Is the child ready to handle being different than everyone or nearly everyone else in his or her class?"

The psychosocial dynamics of an independent school experience draws on the emotions and skills of the entire family. Farquharson further suggests, "If recruited children of color are to succeed in the competitive and demanding environment of independent schools, families need to be aware that children will be faced with more than academic stress, and must develop strategies to help children become emotionally resilient. Children need the coping skills to handle rejection or feeling marginalized. They need to be prepared to feel like misfits at times. The emotional support of parents is critical throughout this process. This is non-negotiable. The priority of parents is paying attention to the needs of their children and responding to those needs as they arise." This balancing act can be tricky, daunting, and enlightening, but can also lead to powerful social and emotional growth for children, parents, and other members of the school community.

As a parent, your involvement in the school community is important. It gives you a window in which to see the nuances and complexities of your child's social and academic world and in turn allows you to more effectively understand and support their needs.

**“Advice to parents: Don’t leave your child –
take an active role; speak with administrators;
be a member of the community; go to parent
events and assembly.”**

**– Dwight Vidale,
Educator, Director of Community Engagement,
Riverdale Country School**

IS AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR YOUR FAMILY?

How do you know if an independent school is the right educational lifestyle choice for your family? Taking a moment to reflect on your child's academic potential, family educational goals and values can help determine if independent schools are a good fit for your child and your family. The following questions may help you decide:

1. Did you attend a private independent school?
2. When you think about your own educational experience what do you value and what would you change?
3. When you think about educating your child or children what do you want for them? What do you expect from them?
4. Do you feel your child is excelling academically and would benefit from increased exposure to academic resources and rigor?
5. How do you support your child's character and academic development at home and at school?
6. When you picture your family unit what comes to mind as you make decisions and solve problems?
7. How do you manage your feelings and negotiate your environment when you are under-represented?
8. Are you willing to navigate and put into perspective the racial and economic disparities in private independent education? Are you willing to support your child in doing the same?
9. Is your family willing to invest money and time towards your children's primary and/or secondary education?
10. Are you willing to be an active partner with your child's school?

If you expect excellence in education and view it as a transformative opportunity to further family legacy while making positive contributions to your communities, then boldly journey with us as we choose an independent school education.

We hope this guidebook broadened your awareness and helped you recognize

the benefits of private independent schools and will keep you inspired to make the best choice for your children's academic career.

In the forthcoming installment, *What Every Family of Color Should Know as They Apply to Independent Schools*, RIISE will address the next stop on this extraordinary educational journey, the admissions process. We'll share real experiences and best practices for one of the most important applications your family will ever complete.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to my children, Elon and Chaz, who continue to amaze and make me proud every day. You, along with other students of color have made the journey sweet. I thank God for the blessings of you and your dad, my husband Keith — RIISE's biggest fan! Thank you, Sandy Shaller for the inspiration to write it and make it plain, and for the many wonderful families who journey alongside mine. Your encouragement and active participation continue to be testimonials for the choices we've made in education. More heartfelt thanks goes out to RIISE Member Schools who have made the extra commitment to attract and support families of color. This guidebook has been made possible with your help and the voices of faculty, administrators, and parents. Alissa, Susan, and LaShieka thank you for your insight, oversight, patience, and friendship.

Gina Parker Collins - Founder, Parent Advocate, Independent School Advisor,
Author

Resources In Independent School Education - RIISE

gpc@4RIISE.org

www.4RIISE.org

Visit us as we continue to build bridges between families of color and private independent schools



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Founded in 1907, Riverdale is committed to empowering lifelong learners by **shaping minds, building character, and developing community** in order to change our local and global world for the good.

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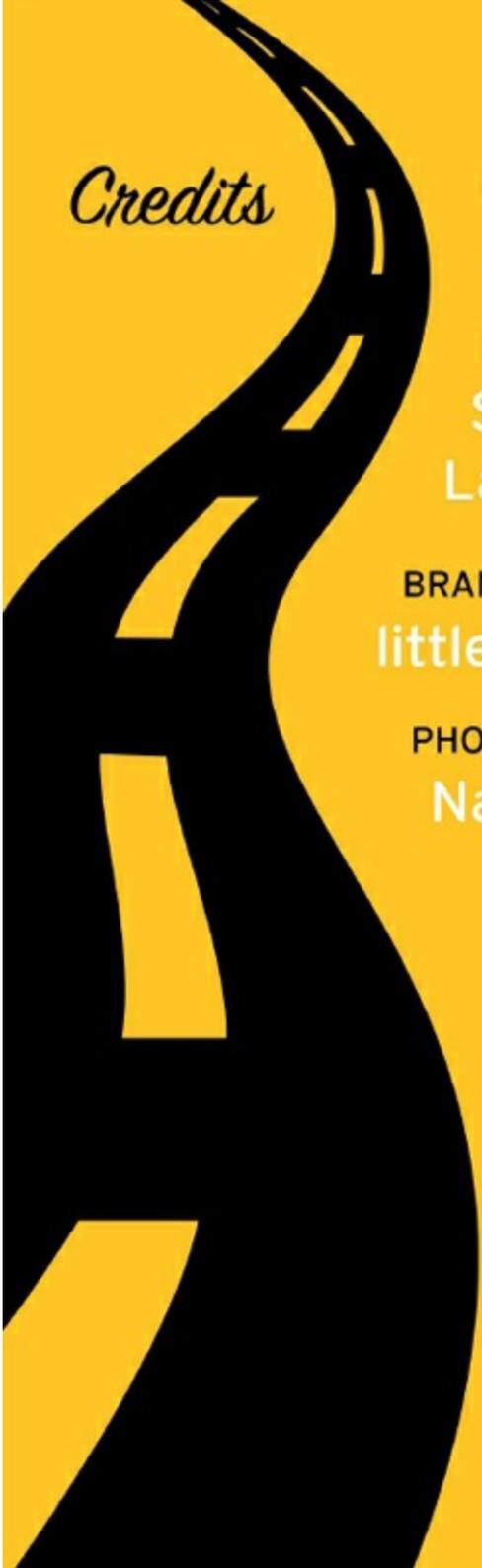
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210 East 77th Street New York, New York 10075 (212) 861-0404 www.bwl.org



Credits

CONTRIBUTOR

Alissa Mayers, M.S.

EDITORS

Susan Fox

LaShieka Hunter

BRANDING & GRAPHIC DESIGN

littlebigGirl + CO

PHOTOGRAPHER

Naima Green