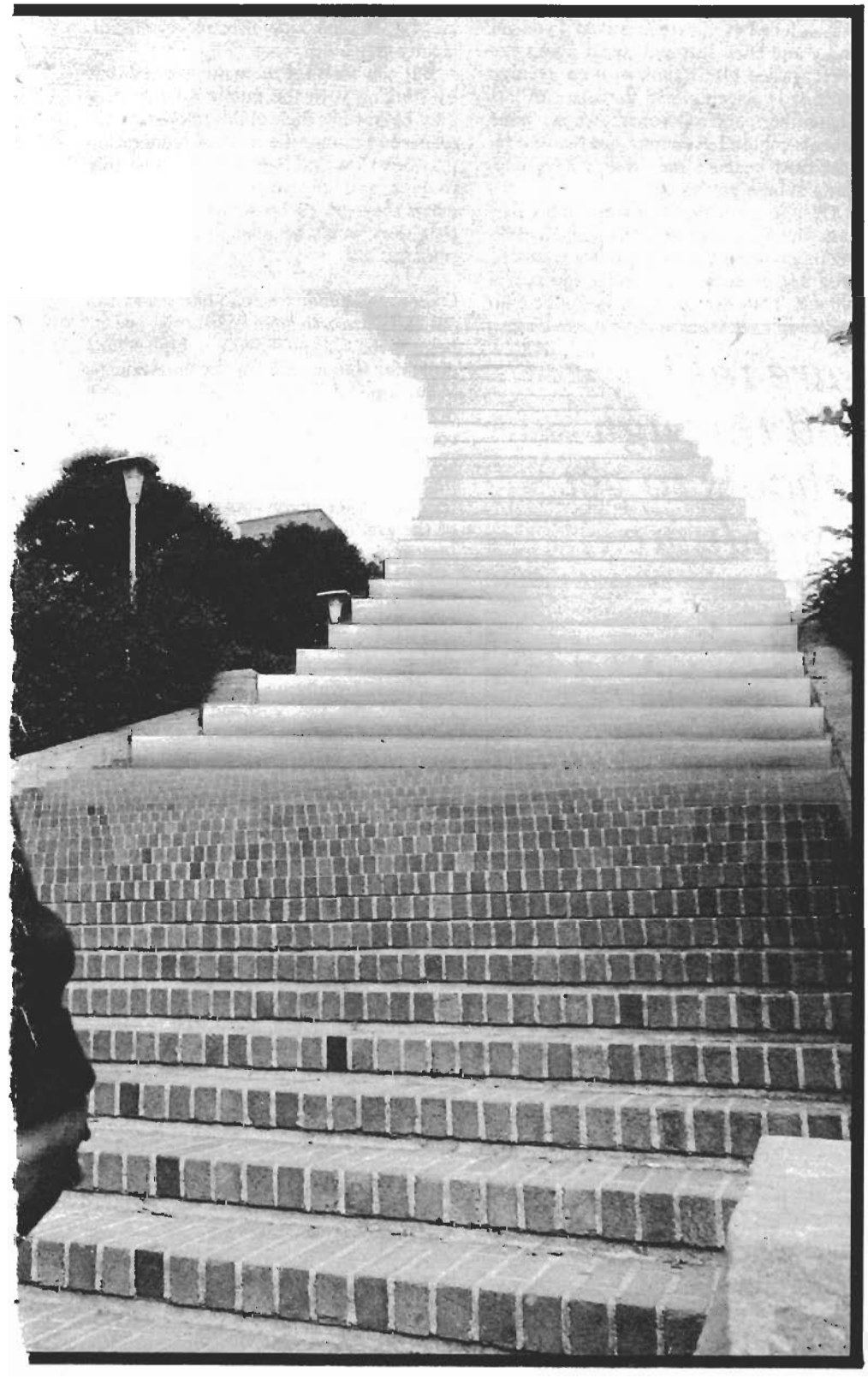
Are Good Colleges Out

With city schools lowering their requirements—and colleges raising theirs—what chance do your children have? Local and national educators and admissions directors have the bad news...and some advice

By Kathleen Neumeyer

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKE HASHIMOTO

# of Reach for L.A.'s Kids?



It's College Night at William Howard Taft High School in Woodland Hills. Several hundred bright-eyed 11th and 12th graders, many accompanied by anxious-looking parents, have taken time off from their homework in U.S. History and Chem I to pick up catalogues and promotional brochures from a smorgasbord of colleges, most of which are represented by volunteer alumni, some by paid members of the college-admissions staffs.

Representatives of about 40 schools, from the Air Force Academy to Mills to Haverford, are clustered in the auditorium at makeshift booths. The walls are festooned with construction-paper pennants decorated with Magic Marker. The one for DePauw University, in Greencastle, Indiana, is spelled "Depaw."

Each campus of the University of California has a classroom to itself along one corridor. In the room assigned to UCLA, Jonathan Page, coordinator of the university's High School Outreach program, is explaining why the lights went off just as he began his third spiel of the evening. "It's one of the terms of our probation," he says. "We can't play in the Rose Bowl, and everywhere I go they turn off the lights before I'm finished."

Page tells students to take most of what they hear tonight with a grain of salt; they should visit the colleges and see for themselves. "Be leery of folks like me, the ones wearing ties," he warns. "We *used* to be students."

In the library, Yale alumnus Stanley Meyer is making a sales pitch for *all* of the Ivy League schools as well as the Seven Sisters. To hear Meyer tell it, it doesn't matter which one you choose—as long as you go east. "The professors who teach your classes at these colleges are the same ones who wrote the textbooks," he says. "The attire at eastern colleges is strictly from Slobsville, and the cooking isn't what mother used to make, but you don't choose a college for the cuisine—or the climate."

"What kind of grades do you need for an eastern school?" a mother inquires.

"They don't just look at grade-point averages," Meyer assures her. "They're interested in the scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test and grade-point average, but more important is what you've done with your life. They want to know what you're interested in, what you do with your weekends, what you do after school."

A fading-blond mother in her forties

Are Good Colleges Out of Reach for L.A.'s Kids?

has a penetrating question for the representative from the University of Pennsylvania. "Can California kids really cut it in the Ivy League?" she asks.

It is the $64,000 question. In fact, she might as well have substituted "*any* accredited four-year liberal-arts college" for "Ivy League." And she is certainly not alone in her concern for her college-prep daughter. Along with thousands of other California kids, and particularly those in the Los Angeles Unified School District, her academic future is very much in question—no matter how good her grades.

Forget about buying that overpriced house in a high-class community so your kids can go to a nice neighborhood school; they will be bused out. And even if you get lucky and they stay put, what about the overcrowded classrooms with an average of 36 kids per class and the chaos of last September and October, when some schools couldn't even send out the first report card because they didn't have anything to base grades on?

Despite all of that there are many parents who up to now wouldn't consider taking their kids out of the mandatory-busing program or even abandoning the public schools. They are believers in public education, in mixed student bodies, and they feel that they are paying enough tax dollars to get their kids effectively and efficiently educated.

But now many of them are worried that by sticking with the public schools they may be putting their children's *futures* in jeopardy because the level of preparation may be so low that their kids won't be able to pick and choose among universities when they get to be seniors—or, worse, that they won't be able to get into any school at all.

"...Some seniors are taking classes at night and through correspondence schools to get enough credits to graduate..."

Of course, anyone who can breathe in and out can go to college in California, just by being over 18 and having a high-school diploma. But even here the question is, What kind of college? California has an open-admissions policy in its two-year community colleges, but the four-year state schools are more selective. The California State University and Colleges System won't take anyone below the top third of the graduating class, and the UC system wants only the top 12.5 per cent.

It's unlikely that the L.A. Board of Education will ever make so many budget cuts that even the *best* students from Los Angeles schools can't get into the University of California. But the current cuts are making it awfully tough for these kids to compete for the best schools. There's barely enough time left in the school schedule to fit in the minimum requirements for graduation—which have just been lowered—and the more highly selective schools ask for a great deal more than the bare minimum.

"I was speaking to the admissions people from Smith College yesterday," says Judy Wilson, a Smith College alumna volunteering at Taft's College Night. "And they say they just don't think they are going to be able to get the high caliber of students they are accustomed to getting from the public schools in Los Angeles. They say they're going to have to start looking for students from Westlake and from the Las Virgenes School District."

And June Sloan, college-placement counselor at Taft, says, "The representative from Southern Methodist University was in my office the other day and pulled out a profile of this school from 1976. I was shocked to see how badly we compare now with what we were four years ago. It was a classic picture of the decline in personnel, the increase in class size and so on. The students are working very hard, but they just can't enrich their programs as

The National Merit Breakdown

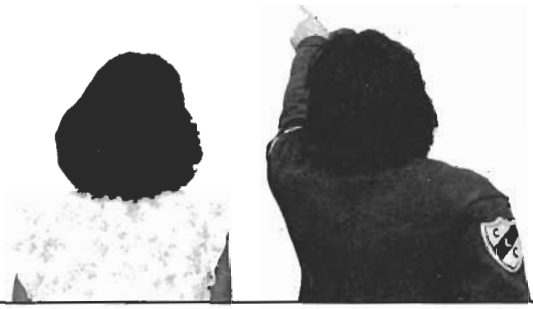
Although officials of the National Merit Scholarship Corporation warn that the quality or effectiveness of an educational system can't be judged by the number of students who become National Merit finalists, it may nevertheless be worth noting which private and public schools had large numbers of National Merit semifinalists. The semifinalists are supposed to represent the top one-half of 1 per cent of the state's high-school seniors.

It was announced in September that Santa Monica High School, a public school, led all metropolitan-area schools, public and private, with 18 semifinalists. The second-largest number was 17, at the private Harvard School for boys in North Hollywood. Among public high schools, the second-highest number of semifinalists was at Palisades High School, which led the public schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Other Los Angeles city schools with significant numbers of semifinalists included El Camino Real High School in Woodland Hills with 10; North Hollywood High with seven; Fairfax High with six; Grant High and University High with five each; Birmingham High with four; and Hamilton High with three.

Other public schools in the area with large totals included Beverly Hills High School with 10; Arcadia High with 10; Palos Verdes High with eight; Agoura High with six; and Culver City High with four.

Harvard School had the highest total among private schools, but other private schools with significant numbers (especially so when you consider that the total number of students at most private schools is considerably smaller than at public high schools) were Polytechnic School in Pasadena with 11; Westlake School for Girls in West L.A. with seven; and Marlborough School for girls in Los Angeles with six. The Westridge School in Pasadena and the Lycée Français in West L.A. each had one. ■



much as they could in the past, and the programs are going to go downhill very rapidly in the next few years."

The comparisons of California public-school education with that in the rest of the country tend to be odious. For example:

- Declining standardized-test scores, according to Gerald Kissler, a UCLA administrator who headed up a task force on why students drop out of the university, show that California students now fall around the national average, while in the 1960s California students were generally above average.
- California students take fewer academic courses in high school than do students in other states.
- In California, the average schoolteacher has 23 pupils in her class; 19 is the national average. (In L.A., however, many elementary schools began the year with 36 students in a class; in the high schools, the figure had risen to as many as 50 students.)
- Though SAT scores have been dropping all over the country, scores in California have dropped more sharply than in other states.
- California seniors scored an average of 472 on the SAT math test, down one point from last year and only six points above the national average.
- On the verbal portion of the SAT, California students averaged 424, exactly the same as the national average—but four points lower than in 1979.
- Since 1971, the nationwide average SAT score has declined 18 points in math and 29 points in the verbal portion, but in California the average has plummeted 21 points in math and 40 in the verbal.
- California students do so badly in English that some 60 per cent of all entering freshmen at UCLA (practically all of them are from California) have to take remedial English before entering a freshman English course.

And it can only get worse. Why? Items: The effect of the shortened class day (first the school board shortened the school day to five periods for all high-school and junior-high students, then it restored the lost periods for junior high, 10th grade and the first half of 11th grade); reduced graduation requirements (cut from 165 to 160 credits because students wouldn't have enough time to take everything in the shortened day); greatly increased class sizes; elimination of many elective subjects that sweetened the package an applicant had to offer a college; elimination of extracurricular activities that gave kids a chance to shine in athletics, music or journalism; elimination of many counselors to advise students; and the elimination of summer school. All have put a heavy burden on the students themselves, who must themselves see to it that they make a record that will maximize their chances of getting into a good college.

"I'm a senior, so it hasn't affected me too much," a long-haired blond Taft senior says. "But my younger sister can't take a second year of science because they cut the school day from six to five periods in the last half of 11th grade and in 12th grade. And the quality of the teaching is so poor that even the kids notice it. The teachers don't have time to grade the papers: They spend five minutes reading an essay that they would have spent 20 minutes grading last year."

"They've cut back the music programs, and that's my main thing," a dark-haired boy complains. "I still take music, but a lot of the other kids who'd like to be in the music class with me can't fit it in because they need the solids."

"Basically, they just can't get in enough courses to make themselves attractive to schools like Stanford, Harvard or Princeton," says University High School college-placement counselor Don Olson. "They have required courses like physical education and health that they have to take, and sometimes that means they have to drop the third year of math or language; that really hurts.

"The college-admissions people are aware of it," Olson continues. "I explain to them, and they are sympathetic, but I have to put myself in their place. If they

The View from Above

Unlike many universities, Stanford doesn't take geography into account when choosing students. It simply picks the ones that seem best and later looks to see where they live. In the past, about half the freshman class has turned out to be from California; this September, however, only 44 per cent were Californians.

Fred Hargadon, dean of admissions, says that might be just coincidence, but it also might mean that when Stanford was picking the cream of the crop this year, Californians didn't rise to the top. "If that trend continues, it would seem rather ominous," Hargadon says.

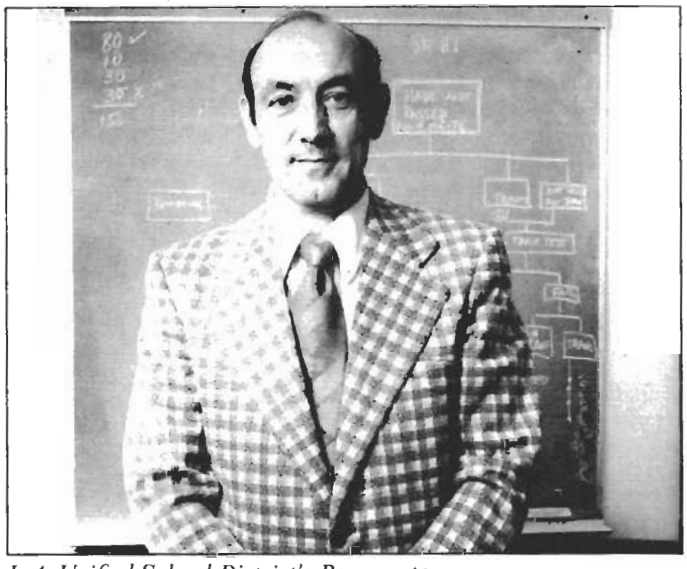
"We are concerned," he continues, "about the school day being cut in Los Angeles, because anything that reduces the length of the school day constrains the chances of the students' being able to take a strong academic program, and it also constrains their ability to develop in other ways, such as music and athletics. That does make them, overall, less attractive than students from private schools, or from other public schools in California or in other states.

"We worry less about test scores than about whether the student has taken the most difficult courses. In California, in general, public-high-school students take fewer years of English, foreign language and math than they do in other states. There isn't any reason why California should fall behind in those areas. I'm surprised that any school district would be setting lower graduation requirements. That sure is selling the kids short."

Roger Campbell, director of admissions for Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, says that Northwestern continues to receive strong applicants from Southern California but points out that "the telling character is probably what is going to happen five or six years down the line, when the students who are in middle school now get into high school and don't have a chance . . ."

Seamus Mallin, assistant dean in Harvard University's admissions office, says Harvard is generally pleased with the quality and diversity of Southern California applicants. However, he feels that Southern California students, whether by choice or lack of it, tend to take less demanding course loads during their senior year of high school and advises them to take the most difficult courses available. He thinks that by doing so they won't be penalized for flaws in the school system. ■

Are Good Colleges Out of Reach for L.A.'s Kids?



L.A. Unified School District's Possemato: Parents and students must shape their own futures.

Pali's Weitzman: Try private summer school.

"...Declining SAT scores are a problem in both public and private schools—and not every private school can boast a terrific choice of colleges..."

are choosing between our kids and some who have taken fuller course loads, our kids are going to be second best.

"Stanford has written to us urging us to have the youngsters take more academic subjects in their senior year. If the school board would waive health, physical education and the required semester of art or practical arts [business, shop, homemaking] for college-preparatory kids, it would help."

Adds UCLA's director of admissions, Rae Lee Siporin: "I'm not really concerned about whether students can get into the University of California. My concern is that they are barely meeting the minimum requirements—just hanging on by their fingernails. To be successful, they ought to be taking more years of foreign language, science and math than is required."

To make up for the schools' deficiencies and to get the required number of units to finish all the courses needed for a diploma, some seniors are taking classes at night school, at community colleges, in university extensions or through correspondence schools.

This year's seniors need 165 semester units to graduate, and their three years of high school were planned to allow exactly enough time for them to finish those 165 units. If they were to drop a course because of illness or for any other reason, or if they fail a course, there would be no opportunity for them to make it up in summer school.

Between 50 and 60 Venice High School seniors are taking courses in night school, and 50 students at University High School are in night school. Some are taking health in correspondence courses, says University High counselor Olson; others are taking a foreign language through a private source, such as Berlitz, if they have it approved by the counselor in advance. Teachers at Palisades and University high schools ran private summer schools last summer, at a cost of $150 for two courses. Various private schools, including Westlake School, also have summer programs, and Beverly Hills High School's summer program is open to youngsters living outside that district.

"It's a shame when you see other school districts," Olson says. "I was back in Minnesota this summer, and when you see what they've got, you want to cry."

But not every educator is crying—yet. Lloyd Weitzman, counselor at Palisades High School, which had the highest number of National Merit semifinalists in the school district this year *(see accompanying story)*, says he doesn't feel the cutbacks are hurting his students this year, although he doesn't know what the future will hold.

Palisades High, perhaps the most college-preparatory-oriented in the L.A. Unified School District, graduated 683 students last June; 92 per cent of them were college bound. Of these, Weitzman says, 61 per cent went to four-year colleges and 31 per cent to community colleges, mostly to Santa Monica City College. He adds that about 40 per cent of his students go to private schools, and that he sent students to Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Amherst, Brown, Stanford and Reed last spring.

Weitzman believes that many Ivy League schools are still trying to recruit

Breaking into the UC System

"Everyone can go to the University of California," says Jonathan Page, coordinator of the High School Outreach program at UCLA. "The only question is when." The thing to do, he says, is to "get a handle on the rules and then make them work for you."

Page tells high-school applicants to remember that the University of California is one university in nine locations and that the rules for admission are the same at all nine campuses. With the exception of Berkeley (which has a north-south quota system), if you are eligible for the University of California you will automatically be admitted. "Eligibility equals acceptance equals admission," he says. He points out that as state schools go, the University of California has rather stringent admission requirements. Aimed at the top 12.5 per cent of the state's graduating seniors, the system offers several different ways to get in: (1) through grade-point average; (2) through SAT scores; (3) through a combination of grades and SATs; and (4) through the junior-college system.

It also has what they call the A-to-F system of required subjects:

A. One year of U.S. history and government
B. Four years of English
C. Two years of mathematics
D. One year of a laboratory science
E. Two years of a foreign language
F. One year of an advanced course in either math, science or a foreign language.

The only grades that the university considers are the grades earned in the A-to-F sequence during the 10th through 12th grades. "You should have a lot of fun in ninth grade, because those grades don't count," Page tells students. "You start playing for keeps in 10th grade."

A student with a 3.3 grade-point average in the A-to-F sequence is automatically eligible for the university. Here's the trick: The university will accept the best grades for those courses, so if a student takes more than the minimum requirements, he or she can use only his or her best grades to qualify.

"We don't even have to discuss the intrinsic value of more knowledge," Page says. "A student should always take more than the minimum to allow us a chance to be flexible with the grades."

In response to a parent who asked, "Doesn't that mean, paradoxically, that students are penalized for taking an advanced-placement course where they get a 'B,' when they might have gotten an 'A' in the basic course?" Page advises students to take advanced courses wherever possible. "When you get to college, you find out that everyone else there got an 'A' in the advanced-placement course, and the students who took lighter course loads find themselves really having to hit the books," he says.

All applicants are required to take the Scholastic Aptitude Tests, but a student who has a 3.3 grade-point average need only score a 400, which is basically the score the SAT board gives you just for paying your money and signing your name.

Another route into the university is through the SATs. A student who scores 1,100 on the SATs and a total of 1,650 on three achievement tests is eligible for the university no matter what his or her high-school grades are. There is also a sliding scale whereby you can combine your grades with your SATs to become eligible. A student with a 3.0 needs an SAT score of 1,090 to get in, for example.

You could also acquire 56 transferable units of credit from any other institution, including a community college, with a grade-point average of 2.4. "If worst came to worst," Page laughs, "you could even take those units at USC." ■

California students, and that they may even be giving an edge to California youngsters in an effort to insure a more national student body. "They're looking for a captain of the football team with a 4.0 average, but they work their way down," Weitzman says. He advises students to get some of their courses out of the way in private summer schools.

Weitzman's optimism isn't shared by Paul Possemato, curriculum specialist for the Los Angeles Unified School District, who says it is obvious that if students once had 36 classes during their four years of high school and now have only 32, their ability to put together a record that is going to look good to colleges is diminished. "It is a fact that prestigious universities have many times more applicants than they have spots, and there comes a point where it becomes important to discern between two students who both have a 3.8 grade-point average," Possemato says. "As our funds diminish, it becomes more probable that we aren't going to be able to provide the discerning difference."

He says it is going to become more important for students and their parents to take their destinies into their own hands and shape their futures. "What I tell parents on the phone is that their first obligation is to increase the level of understanding in the state legislature of the plight of public education. And there are many things students can do to enrich their own programs. They can take courses at a community college, in night school, by correspondence or in independent study. They can take physics, for instance, on their own, under the general supervision of a counselor. That takes bright, highly motivated youngsters, but those are the kind who are competing for the most selective schools, anyway," Possemato says.

But if the public schools are less and less able to educate our kids, is the answer to be found in the private schools?

Not necessarily.

Placement advisers warn that private schools are not a panacea. There are, of course, many private schools that do a much better job of college preparation than some public schools, but they also have their drawbacks. Statistics that show declining SAT scores in California include both public- and private-school children—and not every private school can boast of a list of terrific colleges where its graduates

continued on page 364

COLLEGE

continued from page 241

have matriculated.

There was even gossip on the Westside this summer that an unstructured private school had had difficulty in placing its sixth graders into junior high—and that many of these sixth graders had to be tutored privately because they hadn't picked up the basics.

Many parents have put their children into brand-new private schools that came into existence in August and even early September as schools were yoyoed in and out of the mandatory busing plan. Nobody knows how the graduates of these schools will fare when they knock on college doors. Many universities will not accept students who graduate from nonaccredited secondary schools, but most say they will consider graduates of schools that are seeking accreditation.

Robert Ponce, state assistant superintendent of schools, says that the best assurance of quality in a school is that its teachers have state credentials—and private-school teachers do not have to be credentialed. In judging a high school, he adds, the key factor is whether it is accredited. (The most widely recognized accrediting information on the West Coast is the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.)

There are other advantages to public education that must be weighed against the strictly academic drawbacks. "One of the pluses of public schools," says Anne Kogen of Encino's American College Placement Service, "is that they have a much greater variety of extracurricular activities available. Very few private schools have facilities for real jocks, for example. If you have a son who is likely to be an all-city tackle, you want him to go to a public school where he can be on the number-one team to attract the attention of college coaches."

Adds Harriett Bay of Bedford School Placement and Guidance in Beverly Hills, "The physical setup and facilities in the public schools, from well-equipped chemistry labs to computers, are something not many private schools can match. And almost every public high school has an orchestra. So there *are* tradeoffs."

Some placement people even say that a student might be better off in a public school where he gets higher grades than in a private school where he may be just mediocre. "I think the kids in the bottom of the class would like to think that," says Holly Sorenson of the Harvard School. But, she adds, "if a boy is at the bottom of his class at Harvard, he certainly wouldn't have been a superstar at a public school. If they haven't done the job here, they haven't done the job. What's more, I think when colleges are consistently getting good applicants from a school, they are aware of that school and don't just take the top few. They are aware of the standards of the school, and it works to the advantage of the student. It may be a subtle advantage, but it is there."

And after all, isn't it an advantage that most parents are seeking for their kids? "What we need in this increasingly technical society is more education, not less," says Bill Melton, assistant principal at University High School.

"California's public-school system is the world's great public-education system. But Proposition 13 took away our funding from the local property taxes and switched to the state, which gives us 80 per cent of our funding. What we need from the legislature now is funding that compensates for inflation, an ongoing source of funds so we can plan ahead. A school cannot shut down its assembly line and resume production in a few weeks. This is the kids' only shot." ■