

The Dilemma of Choice

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After a forty-five minute commute on the interstate, tired Tom Johnson arrived home anxious to hear from his wife, Sue, about her visit to the Shady Brook Elementary School. During the summer, Sue and Tom will move to their new home closer to Tom's new position as head of marketing for Torvex Corporation.

"Hi honey," Tom called as he entered their home. "How was your visit to Shady Brook?"

"I was really impressed," Sue said. "I can't wait to tell you about it."

Tom noticed their new, *Your State Today* magazine on the counter. "Look at that cover," he said, "How appropriate is that? 'Public Schools Ranked –Which is the best one for your child?'"

"Yes, I saw that when I brought in the mail," replied Sue. "After Julie is settled in for the night, let's talk about my visit to Shady Brook and your research on the Department of Education's website. We'll need to make a decision for Julie soon to meet the school choice deadline."

Background

Sue Johnson and her husband, Tom, were looking forward to moving into their new home in Briarwood. Their daughter, Julie, will begin first grade in the fall. Because of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal law, and the Choice Provisions found within the state law, Delaware parents may choose which school is best suited for their children. Sue and Tom have many lingering questions about the feeder pattern school for their development of Briarwood, even though this school had maintained a superior rating on the state's testing program for four consecutive years. The reason for their hesitation is that a nearby charter school plans to expand from its current middle school format to include elementary grades starting next year. Cedar Charter School currently maintains the top middle school ranking based on the state test scores; its elementary program will probably be ranked high as well when it opens. Sue and Tom were also somewhat surprised at their realtor's hesitation when they asked him about the local school system. He said he was aware of Shady Brook's continuing superior ranking, but bragged that his own children attended Cedar Charter.

Shady Brook Elementary School, where Julie would be assigned in the fall, is a small, racially diverse suburban school. Because of its superior rating this year, the school had over 100 applications because of the school choice provision. However, only 75 were accepted due to a lack of classroom space. Sue and Tom understood why parents use the choice program to send their children to a school with a superior ranking. They felt similar pressures to make the right decision for their own daughter's educational future. They knew that a superior elementary school could provide Julie with an excellent foundation for success in middle and high school.

Visit to Shady Brook

Earlier in the day, Sue Johnson had visited Shady Brook Elementary School. As she entered the school office, she noticed a sharply dressed, slender woman greeting children as they entered the school office. She looked at the woman's school identification badge, Sue smiled and introduced herself. "Good morning, Principal Smith, I'm Sue Johnson. I'm here for our appointment."

“I’m so happy to meet you,” the principal responded warmly. “Shall we take a tour of the building while we talk?”

As they walked down the main hallway, Sue exclaimed, “What a beautiful garden!”

“Yes, we love it,” replied Ms. Smith. Several of our second grade teachers wrote a grant for our butterfly garden, which is used to augment our inquiry-based science curriculum. In the spring, we’re getting a second grant for a native habitat bird garden. We think that these gardens bring environmental science to life for our students.”

Making a left in the hallway, the principal continued, “We have a wonderful staff of dedicated teachers here at Shady Brook. Sixty-five percent of our teachers hold a master’s degree or higher and eleven have earned National Board Certification.”

“How about you?” inquired Sue.

“I’ve been here since the building first opened. I have a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from the University of Delaware and a master’s in administration from Wilmington College. I’ve been in education for twenty-seven years now.”

Ms. Smith stopped at the door of a classroom. “I thought you might enjoy visiting some of our classrooms, so I brought you to room 21.” She opened the door, and greeted the class, “Good morning. We’re just coming in for a little visit.”

“Good morning, Principal Smith,” answered a chorus of voices.

Sue followed the principal as she walked around the classroom. Everything hummed along smoothly, as the two teachers worked with the highly engaged students. As the students wrote independently, Ms. Smith asked several of them what they liked about their school.

Warren replied, “My teachers help me learn new things to help me go to college.”

Amal stated enthusiastically, “In our school, we have lots of celebrations!”

“I like the cafeteria food,” said Mark.

Alexa added, “The teachers are lots of fun!”

As they left the classroom, Ms. Smith explained, “That was one of our inclusive classrooms. It has two teachers with a mix of regular and special education students.”

Continuing down another hallway, Ms. Smith and Sue then stopped to visit several other classrooms including a first grade, the library, computer lab, gym, music, and art rooms. In music, a class was working with a group of students from the local university and a representative from the Delaware Symphony Orchestra. “One of our teachers plans and coordinates these music activities,” she explained.

As they turned down the main hallway, Sue asked, “Is the curriculum at Shady Brook standards-based?”

“Yes,” replied Ms. Smith. Then she added, “By state law, all of our primary classrooms are kept small, usually between 22 and 24 students in each. Our fourth and fifth grades are larger, however, averaging 28 students to a classroom.”

“What about parent involvement?” Sue inquired. “At my daughter’s current school, parents and members of the community are driving forces in helping the school to flourish.”

Ms. Smith replied, “Our P.T.A. is smaller than I’d like, but it is extremely active and supports many student enrichment programs such as science night and the artist-in-residence program. We have also worked hard to build alliances with the local community through a student mentoring program.”

Arriving at the school office, the principal greeted two active P.T.A. members, “Good morning Janet, Cathy. This is Sue Johnson. Sue and her family are moving into our area soon. She may have a few questions to ask you both.”

Janet said, "Sure," And Ms. Smith excused herself to speak to a parent.

"Happy to meet you," Sue said.

"Where will you be living?" Janet asked.

"We've bought a home in Briarwood," Sue answered.

"That's where we live!" exclaimed Janet. "You'll love it there."

"How do you feel about Shady Brook?" Sue asked.

"Oh, we love it! In fact," she continued, "all three of my children have gone to Shady Brook. It's a wonderful school with a fantastic staff."

As they continued to talk, Sue learned that Janet's two older children currently attend Friendship Middle School. Sue commented, "So, you didn't choose to send them to Cedar Charter School."

"No," replied Janet, "my husband Dale and I didn't see the need, and our children wanted to stay in their current schools." Then she added, "I teach part-time at the university, but in my spare time I help out here, in my youngest child's class. I believe all of my children are being challenged, but more importantly, they're really happy and love school. I wouldn't want that to change. My husband and I entered them in the charter school admissions lottery, but after we talked about it, we decided to withdraw the request. We're happy with our decision."

Cathy reiterated what Janet had said, but added that her children's assigned school was Maple Hill, where her youngest child, Alice, was in kindergarten. Her son attends Shady Brook as part of the inclusion program. "Alice," she said proudly, "will go to Charter next year."

"Why not exercise your choice and apply for your daughter to attend Shady Brook with your son?" inquired Sue. "You said it was a great school."

"Yes, Shady Brook is a great school and a newer facility than Maple Hill, but I would have kept applying to Charter until Alice finally was admitted there," Cathy explained.

The question of "why" lingered in Sue's mind, but delving further might have seemed a bit pushy on her part. However, as Sue was leaving the main office, she overheard a conversation coming from the principal's office. "I just wanted to tell you that Sara, Billy, John, and Miles will be attending Charter next year. We love you and the teachers here at Shady Brook and it has been a wonderful school for our children. Thank you for everything." Then a tall blonde-haired woman emerged from the principal's office.

At this point, Janet smiled and excused herself, but offered Sue her e-mail address for any further questions that she might have. Luckily, Ms. Smith was done with her meeting and ushered Sue into her office to wrap up the visit. Sue continued to ask questions, such as if there were resources for not only those students who might need extra help to succeed, but also for those students who are high achievers. Principal Smith replied yes to both questions, quickly adding that the school currently had two reading teachers and a full-time talent development coach for the high achievers. Differentiated instruction is a part of classroom instruction as well, to accommodate individual student needs. Sue thanked Ms. Smith for her informative visit and left Shady Brook Elementary School impressed by what she has seen and heard from the principal. However, she was still puzzled by the conversation she had heard coming from Ms. Smith's office. As she drove home, she felt that many things about this school would make it a great choice for Julie.

The Choice

Later, as she enthusiastically recounted her visit to Shady Brook School to Tom, he tentatively agreed that the school did sound great.

“I’m glad you were able to visit Shady Brook,” he said. “But I’m still a little leery about how things could change at Shady Brook next year with the competition from the Cedar Charter School. I’m also glad you got Janet’s e-mail address; we might have a few questions we’ll want to ask after we talk.” He, too, had done some investigative work about the schools during some downtime at the office. As the manager of the marketing department, he knew how important facts are when presenting a product. He also knew how easily they could be manipulated.

“I copied some information from the state department of education website,” said Tom, as he pulled out the graphs he printed out and sat down next to her. Tom told Sue that he first examined the state test data, which is published annually on the local newspaper website. He compared the data from his daughter’s current school, Minnow Elementary with Shady Brook Elementary.

“Looking at this,” said Sue, “Julie would actually be going to a more challenging school next year, where the test scores have been constantly improving.” Tom agreed that was his impression as well and explained what he did next. Knowing that the local charter school was expanding into Shady Brook’s attendance area next year, he wanted to see how it affected the local middle school when it originally opened. He was curious about whether opting for the charter now would be a better choice, given that Julie would be guaranteed a slot there during her middle school years – and that the slots would become more scarce due to the existing enrollment in the elementary segment of the school.

When comparing these schools’ test scores, two things became evident to Tom. He pointed out that the levels of student performance at Friendship Middle School since 2002 did not seem to be affected by the additional competition from the charter school. Second, he also noticed that the charter school students vastly outperformed the students who went to the feeder pattern school, Friendship Middle. The charter school consistently had some of the top scores in the state, while Friendship had some of the lowest scores in the state and the demographic information was vastly different between the two.

Delving even further into the numbers, Tom told Sue that he went to the Department of Education’s website and looked up the profiles of the two middle schools to compare the staffs of Friendship and Cedar Charter.

Once again Tom wasn’t comfortable with what he saw. “It’s good that the student-teacher ratio at Friendship is low,” he told Sue, “but I don’t think it’s affecting their test scores. I didn’t like that.” He also pointed out, “It looks like more than a fourth of the teaching staff at Friendship Middle have fewer than three years of teaching experience. Either most of them leave or it’s just a very young staff.”

The Questions

Putting down the stats and graphs, Sue turned to Tom with questioning eyes and stated the obvious, “This isn’t going to be an easy decision. I’ll e-mail Janet tomorrow with a few more questions,” Sue said. “I want to ask her about that conversation I overheard in the office today about the four children leaving Shady Brook. I’m sure she overheard it as well. I also wonder why such a satisfied parent was taking her children out of this wonderful school? What I saw and heard from Ms. Smith at Shady Brook today was so informative and positive. Then there was the question about Cathy’s children. Why would parents want to place their two children in different elementary schools? I’m puzzled. But I hope we can get some answers in time to make the choice deadline and make the best decision for Julie.”