

Whiz Kid Heads For Harvard

By Sigrid Bøthen
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Jonathan Shapiro, student member of the state Board of Education, seems almost too good to be true.

A straight-A student at El Camino Real High School in Woodland Hills, he has been, at various times — sometimes at the same time — president of his class, student body president, debating champion, winner of multiple scholarships, cross-country runner, senior class valedictorian, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley's "Youth of the Year" award recipient and member of the education board.

At 18, he appears to have missed out entirely on adolescent rebellion. He likes school, works hard, loves his family and speaks highly of his parents.

Although he missed 50 days of school last term while serving as the only student representative on the state board, he was graduated with that same straight-A average.

In the fall, he enters Harvard University — as a sophomore.

As California education increasingly moves toward a have/have-not division — with middle- and upper-class kids, mostly white, attending private schools or public schools in suburbs like Woodland Hills, and low-income minority students becoming the majority in beleaguered, inner-city public schools — it is easy to dismiss the Jonathan Shapiros of this world as spoiled rich kids who have it made.

In fact, neither of his parents is a college graduate; his father is an office furniture manufacturer's representative and his mother works part time as a bank teller. They bought their house in Woodland Hills 15 years ago when Jonathan was 3 and his brother David, now a UCLA law student, was 7, before southern California home costs priced most people out of the market.

Far from being lily-white, his junior and senior high schools have been part of a voluntary busing program since Jonathan was in junior high, with black students bused to Woodland Hills from inner-city Los Angeles 15 miles away. In his senior year, Shapiro estimates the school's ethnic population to be approximately 70 percent middle-class or upper-middle-class whites and Asians, and 30 percent poor minorities, primarily blacks and including representatives of several inner-city black gangs.

As a result of the voluntary busing program, he says there are few racial problems at the school. "I remember once when I was running for class president, and the kids who were bused were late because of a traffic jam," he recalls. "I was 50 votes behind until they got there, and then I was 50 votes ahead."

"I've been going to school with the same kids for years. The moral to that, I suppose, is that if students have grown up together, the racial lines aren't as strong.



Bee photo

JONATHAN SHAPIRO

It's when kids are thrown together in high school, when racial feelings are already cemented, that you have problems.

"I was awfully idealistic when I went on the board," he says. "I had no idea it would be so political. You can sit in meetings for days and find nothing that relates directly to students."

His careful, articulate comments about the board's serious political infighting, which he made in his final board meeting last week, were clearly taken seriously by other members, who listened quietly and then gave him a standing ovation.

He urged board members to set aside political differences that have virtually paralyzed the board in recent months, indefinitely delaying important decisions affecting public schools and converting board sessions into long, fruitless harangues among members.

Among his contributions to the board, Shapiro — who was elected by other student leaders on the California Student Advisory Board on Education — conducted several statewide surveys of student views on subjects ranging from curriculum to violence. A strong supporter of public education, he says it is in serious trouble.

His surveys showed that many students think school is too easy, that teachers often don't teach, that parents all too often don't take much interest, that school environments are physically threatening — in short that the system is breaking down.

Despite his obvious and acute intelligence, Shapiro says he was not a good student as a child. His grades were poor, he said, and he didn't much like school. Following an older brother whose academic performance was stellar, he failed the so-called test for "gifted" students several times. "They figured I was gifted

because I was loquacious," he says, "but I kept flunking the test. I never did pass it."

A case in point for the power of exceptional teachers is Jonathan's big turnaround in his academic performance in the sixth grade.

"I had a very young teacher who introduced me to (John F. Kennedy's) 'Profiles in Courage,'" Shapiro recalls. "He gave me a series of things I enjoyed doing, including sports. He also told me what grade point I had to have to do those things I enjoyed doing."

"My grades improved, but I still flunked the gifted test."

He supports efforts to reform the teacher tenure laws, and believes teachers have too many job protections that operate — along with declining enrollment and fiscal constraints — against new, young teachers.

Not surprisingly, Shapiro plans a political career. He seems to believe politics can change things. His state board experience has taught him something about how difficult that career can be.

This summer, he will be working in the re-election campaign of state schools chief Wilson Riles. "Politics," he says, "is all I ever really wanted to do. It can be — is — a very dirty profession, I'd like to think I could be different."

Shapiro believes deeply in public schools. And he knows many students in his well-to-do community whose parents send them to private schools.

"What they're getting in private schools is a lower student-teacher ratio and more individual attention," he says. "What they're losing when they leave public education is diversity. Private schools create a very sheltered life, and I don't think that's healthy."

To improve public education, particularly in the high schools, he suggests — in addition to more stringent standards for teachers — more counseling, more homework for students, more student self-discipline, and much, much more parental involvement.

"High school is such a difficult time, and it's so unfair to expect kids to make decisions without counseling, which is very often the first area where financial cutbacks are made," he says. "The opportunities are there, and the students who are challenged are those who seek out the opportunities. But often they can't do that without counseling, or without an older brother, or a family who cares."

Throughout his schooling, he remembers, his parents were there — going to teacher conferences and school open houses, helping with homework, making mealtime a time for talk.

And, then, there was the matter of the curfew — 1 a.m. on weekends, much earlier on school nights. "I think I was the only person who did have a curfew," he says. "My girlfriend doesn't have one, and that can be embarrassing. But over the years I've appreciated it."