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Back, or Front, to School

Across the Street, It's All About Noise, Joys, Parking and Belonging

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With schools back in session, many parents are focused on whether their children have good teachers, nice classmates and appropriate homework assignments.

But Takoma Park resident Mary Bailey, who lives on the same street as Piney Branch Elementary School and Takoma Park Middle School, and behind Takoma Park Elementary School, has different school-related concerns.

"Massive noise" from the "hordes of kids walking home from school" is one of them. "It shatters your peace" for about half an hour after school lets out, she said.

Trash is another problem. Bailey said she finds "all kinds of food wrappers, bottles and crumpled up notebook paper strewn on the street every day of the school year."

As Bailey has discovered, when a school is on your street or within a few blocks of your home, your quality of life is affected.

On the plus side, a nearby school can build residents' sense of belonging in a neighborhood. That's been the case for District resident Minosha Modi, who lives next door to the Children's Studio School, an elementary school, and a block and a half from Cardozo High School. Her son, 1, is too young to attend either. But hearing the high school's marching band practice on the weekends and seeing elementary school children walking and chatting in front of her house or playing in their playground on weekdays "makes you feel like you're living in a community, which is sometimes hard to find in an urban environment," she said.

A school's presence can also tie suburban neighbors together. Arlington resident Liz Vance, who lives a block and a half from Barrett Elementary, takes her 4-year-old son to play at the school's playground with his friends who live nearby. "Our communities are so fragmented today, and you really have to work hard to get to know anyone beyond a 'hey, how are ya?' " she said. "Having a neighborhood school helps me [help my son] to feel like he's a part of something."

Schools often have other facilities easily available to neighbors. For example, Piney Branch Elementary in Takoma Park has an indoor pool where Bailey often swims. Olney resident Michelle West lives a block from Rosa Parks Middle School and frequently walks there with her 6-year-old son and 2-year-old twins to play on the tennis courts and ball fields.

Community events sometimes take place on school grounds, and living close by can make it easy to attend. That's what Bailey has found by living so close to Takoma Park Middle School, where jazz and folk festivals and fireworks have been held. "We can just walk right over without having to find parking, which can be especially horrible on the Fourth of July," she said.

Families with children who attend a nearby school enjoy the convenience of walking to class. But there are other benefits.

Talk to Capitol Hill mother Gina Arlotto, for example, and you'll hear about what good walkers her children, ages 3, 6 and 9, have become by strolling four blocks each school day to and from Watkins Elementary School. "It's easy exercise for the kids and me," she said.

It has also provided a way for the children to learn about nature. "They pick up rocks, talk about azaleas and crape myrtles, look for birds' nests and see squirrels finding acorns," Arlotto said.

Linda von Allmen of the District, who lives two short blocks from Lafayette Elementary School, says that walking her two older children to school each day enables her to more easily organize their social and extracurricular lives. "I can talk to other parents

and set up activities," she said. "I would miss that in a carpool lane."

Also, "I can stay more involved in the children's school" by communicating regularly with teachers in person, she added.

Still, living near a school brings some hassles. The noise and trash problems mentioned by Bailey can continue on weekends when sporting and other events are held. Additionally, commuters can get delayed because so many parents drive their children to school.

West, the Olney resident, can attest to that. She typically leaves for work between 7:40 and 8 a.m., around the same time as morning drop off at Rosa Parks Middle School, and finds that traffic gets backed up on her route out of the neighborhood because parents "don't follow rules when dropping off their kids." They double park and stop their cars on both sides of the street, "so I have to wait until kids decide to get out of the car" to proceed, she said.

Moreover, when there are school plays, meetings or back-to-school nights, parents use her street for overflow parking and end up leaving their cars along the edges of her lawn.

Traffic issues near a high school can be compounded by rowdy children revving up their cars, and inexperienced drivers exceeding the speed limit. Moreover, if you live near a high school and some teens decide to do something "outrageous," then "your house might be the first one to get hit," said Roland Gomez, a real estate agent with the Annandale office of Weichert Realtors. It's no fun to wake up to a flat tire, battered mailbox or egg-splashed windows.

Another potential issue: The school building may be a bad neighbor. D.C. resident Modi says the property of the Children's Studio School next to her house has overgrown weeds and needs repair. "Some of the maintenance issues make the neighborhood look run down," Modi said.

Yet despite the drawbacks, houses in short walking distance from a school are usually in limited supply and highly valued, so people are willing to pay a premium for them "even if the community is

not in a premier yuppie location," said Eric Tyson, coauthor of "Home Buying for Dummies."

Bailey understands the appeal of living near a school, despite her complaints. "We would still move here again because of the benefit of having a community and the difficulty of getting a house these days," she said.

The hassles brought on by the school's presence "don't risk life or make things horrible. It's just a major inconvenience to have to plan life around the crowds and noise."

But Bailey, who has a 2-year-old son, knows that one of these winters she will be celebrating another positive element of her home's location: "The middle school has a great hill," she said. "I can't wait until my son is old enough to go sledding there."

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