Ted Einstein and Deborah Hazel Johnson might once have been considered typical PTA members in Washington's suburban public schools. He's a physics professor at the University of Maryland. She's a psychologist. They live on a quiet, leafy street of brick homes in the Colesville area of Silver Spring, a neighborhood they chose because they wanted their two boys, David and Nathan, to attend the Montgomery County public schools.

"We heard the schools were excellent," Johnson says. "And it was very important to us that our kids get along with all sorts of people, that they feel that all people are equals."

Ingrid Duran lives a few miles away from Einstein and Johnson in an apartment in Takoma Park. A sign in the lobby warns that the police are authorized to act for the landlord. She dropped out of high school when the first of her three children was born.

She has something in common with Einstein and Johnson. She has high aspirations for her children: "I want them to complete school and go to college...I want them to be anything they want to be." And to help her children realize their dreams, she has turned to the same suburban school system chosen by Einstein and Johnson.

Can our public schools satisfy both families?

Ingrid Duran began calling the Washington suburbs home in 1989, when she was 12. Her parents were immigrants from the Dominican Republic. They moved to a small but growing Latino community in Gaithersburg, where her mother had siblings. Ingrid enrolled in Watkins Mill High School.

She felt, she remembers, like a stranger. Duran is a petite, pretty, woman with light brown skin and curly brown hair. The kids at Watkins Mill were used to white faces and, to a lesser degree, black faces. She was neither. "They'd touch my hair and say, 'Is this your real hair?' " she recalls.

At 15, she got pregnant. Her conscience rebelled at the prospect of an abortion, and she gave birth to a son, Gabriel. She dropped out of school. She married Gabriel's father and had another child with him, Rebekah. Their marriage failed after a year.

Ingrid moved to Takoma Park. When she was 19, she met Curtis Boodoo, a 17-year-old from Trinidad who worked as a mechanic and liked to race cars. Ingrid had a third child, a brown-skinned, elfin girl she named Lystra "Lissy" Duran-Boodoo. Then she found that Curtis was seeing someone else and she ended the relationship.

The success, or failure, of these suburban schools will shape the future of the communities around them. Theirs is a test every bit as hard as the test racial integration put to urban schools decades ago—a test the cities in many ways failed.