

# Chapter 1

## School Desegregation Is Over in the Inner Cities: What Do We Do Now?

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“The mark of the age,” novelist Walker Percy wrote, “is that terrible things happen and no evil is involved.” Surely Percy’s observation rings true when we ponder racial isolation in our nation’s inner-city schools. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court ordered an end to racially segregated public education. Tragically, in spite of hundreds of federal court orders and the efforts of the U.S. Justice Department, the NAACP, and legions of fair-minded educators, hundreds of thousands of African Americans still attend school in racial isolation. Demographic trends suggest that racial isolation in the schools will grow worse, not better, in the years to come.

Overwhelming evidence is all around us. In many of the nation’s urban districts—Cleveland, Detroit, New Orleans, and Washington, DC, to name a few—African Americans comprise 70, 80, and even 95% of the total student enrollment (National Center for Educational Statistics 2000). In Los Angeles, the nation’s second largest district, non-Hispanic whites make up only 15% of the school population. In Miami, the nation’s fourth largest district, the figure is just 13%. According to a study by the Harvard University’s Civil Rights Project, American schools are rapidly resegregating (Orfield and Yun 1999). As Gary Orfield and Susan Eaton (1996) wrote in *Dismantling Desegregation*, the nation’s schools appear to be returning to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* era of “separate but equal,” when segregated schools were taken for granted in many states and upheld by the courts.

Desegregation litigation continues in many urban school districts, but lawsuits and desegregation strategies have not stepped the outflow of white students. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for example, a school desegregation lawsuit has been ongoing for 46 years, but demographic projections predict the district will be nearly all

black within the next few year (Caldas and Bankston 2000). This scenario appears to be the future for many urban districts all over the United States.

In fact, it is time for civil rights advocates and desegregation experts to confront reality. School desegregation is over in the inner cities. No desegregation strategy now in place or likely to be put in place will change these facts: most minority school children in the inner cities attend racially isolated schools and will do so for the foreseeable future.

### **How Did This Happen?**

How could this have happened? How did the bright and tangible promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* dissolve into an “arid abstraction” in the core cities (Carter 1995, p. 626), devoid of power or meaning for African American school children?

Mountains of books, articles, and papers have tried to answer this question, but basically they all point to three possible explanations.

#### *The Supreme Court’s Milliken Decision*

First, some scholars blame the Supreme Court itself for making a promise in *Brown* and then snatching it away in later decisions. Specifically, they point to the Court’s decision in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), in which the Court struck down a trial court’s desegregation plan for metropolitan Detroit (Orfield and Yun 1999). This plan would have required about 50 predominately white suburban communities to participate in desegregating the Detroit district’s overwhelmingly black schools. In the trial court’s view, a metropolitan plan that would force suburban white children into contact with Detroit’s black children was the only feasible way to attack racial isolation in the Detroit system.

In perhaps its most important desegregation decision since *Brown*, the Supreme Court rejected the trial court’s cross-district desegregation plan, ruling that such strategies are only permissible when there is evidence that school district boundaries were drawn for the purpose of racial segregation. In addition, the Court expressed skepticism about the creation of a “super school district” that would diminish the powers of more than 50 local school boards and perhaps create a logistical nightmare.

Without a doubt, *Milliken* stopped most cross-district desegregation proposals in their tracks. Thus the Court virtually guaran-

teed the demographic picture that now exists in urban areas: a racially isolated inner-city school district surrounded by a ring of largely white suburban school systems.

This pattern is particularly prominent in the Northern industrial cities where school systems were organized without regard to racial makeup, foreclosing any argument that district boundaries were drawn to promote segregation. For example, many of the suburban towns around Boston were organized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Massachusetts was still a British colony. Today, the schools of modern Wellesley, Newton, and Concord are overwhelmingly white, while the majority of students in nearby Boston are black, Hispanic, or Asian. No one can rationally argue, however, that these municipal subdivisions were intentionally organized to promote racially segregated schools.

In addition, *Milliken* affected Northern cities more than Southern cities because many urban school systems in the North are geographically small compared to the countywide systems that are common in the South. Looking at a map of the Boston metropolitan area, it is apparent that white parents can conveniently work in Boston without putting their children in Boston's schools. It is only a short drive from Boston's city center to the affluent and overwhelmingly white communities of Brookline, Newton, or Waltham.

Critics of the Supreme Court may be right to say that *Milliken* contributed to the transformation of urban school systems into racial ghettos. Still, it is by no means certain that the demographics of the core cities' schools would be any different had the Supreme Court approved the Detroit cross-district desegregation plan that was at issue in *Milliken*.

Specifically, the logistics of managing metropolitan-wide desegregation plans would be overwhelming, as the U. S. Supreme Court pointed out in *Milliken*. The Detroit plan that the Supreme Court considered in *Milliken* would have involved three-quarters of a million students; and, if implemented, would have put enormous strains on transportation, municipal taxing systems, and traditional notions of local control. It seems highly unlikely that federal courts would mandate many desegregation remedies of that magnitude even if the Supreme Court were to allow them to do so.

### *Segregated Housing Patterns*

A second explanation for *Brown's* failure in the core cities has to do with the nation's housing patterns, whereby African Americans are still largely contained within all black residential districts. Until

African Americans and white families live together in integrated neighborhoods, some commentators argue, no meaningful desegregation will occur in urban schools.

This observation is surely correct. In fact, school desegregation has been most successful in rural districts and the smaller cities, where blacks and whites generally live in closer contact than in the large metropolitan areas. For example, Louisiana's West Feliciana Parish, where I lived for a time, is a rural community where blacks and white live in close proximity to one another, and which was successfully desegregated many years ago. The school system has a school population of about 1200 students, almost evenly split between white and black. Since the district has only one high school, all high school students are assigned to it without regard to race, a simple desegregation strategy that probably incorporates what the Supreme Court intended in *Brown*. Such a strategy would not be adequate, however, in an urban district of 100,000 students where white families and black families typically live in different residential sections of the city.

Unfortunately, those who explain racial isolation in urban schools by pointing to segregated housing patterns have no realistic solutions for changing this situation. No federal law or court-articulated constitutional right compels adult citizens to be assigned to residences by race. As a political matter, it seems unlikely that such a law will ever be enacted. Indeed, an effective integrated housing policy is probably more unlikely than a decision by the Supreme Court to overrule the *Milliken* decision. Thus to speak of *Milliken* or housing as core reasons for *Brown's* failure is to offer very little that is helpful in the search for a solution to racial isolation in urban schools.

### *Underestimating the Impact of "White Flight"*

There is, however, a more useful explanation for the racial isolation of inner-city school children, and it is this. During the 1960s and early 1970s, most of the major players in the school desegregation process—judges, attorneys, political leaders and policy makers—failed to recognize the overwhelming impact of "white flight" on school desegregation plans. In fact, many of the people most involved in school desegregation refused to admit that middle-class families were fleeing urban school districts in such massive numbers that they were fatally undermining judicial efforts to enforce the *Brown* decision. Furthermore, because they refused to admit this fact, they failed to craft solutions that might have counteracted the mass flight of middle class families out of the cities.

One of the first policy scholars to address white flight forthrightly was James S. Coleman, the eminent social scientist and author of the Coleman Report. In a *Phi Delta Kappan* article that appeared in 1975, and which was subsequently reprinted (1979), Coleman pointed out what now seems obvious: racial isolation of urban school children was increasing even as segregation within school districts was on the wane.

This increase in between-district segregation, as I have said, results principally from the movement of whites to districts with fewer blacks. Its increase is not checked by any policies of desegregation of central-city districts; yet it is clear that segregation of the future in metropolitan areas of the U.S. will be of this sort: central-city schools nearly all black, suburban schools largely white. (Coleman, 1979, p. 124)

Furthermore, Coleman suggested, the desegregation process might actually be counterproductive. “[D]esegregation in some large cities is certainly not solving the problem of segregation,” Coleman wrote. “Ironically, ‘desegregation’ may be increasing segregation. That is, eliminating central-city segregation does not help if it increases greatly the segregation between districts through accelerated white loss” (1979, p. 126).

Coleman’s article was widely criticized for its research methods, its findings, and its conclusions. Perhaps his harshest detractors were Thomas Pettigrew and Robert Green, who blasted Coleman in the pages of the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1976. (The piece was reprinted in a 1979 collection of essays.) Pettigrew and Green described Coleman’s desegregation piece as methodologically flawed and “an unprecedented campaign by a sociologist to influence public policy” (p. 133). Most damningly, they charged that Coleman’s conclusions about desegregation were derived more from his personal beliefs than his research. Although smoothly written and accompanied by tables and graphs, Pettigrew and Green’s essay had a harsh and jarring tone. Their underlying theme was that Coleman’s conclusions were not only incorrect, they were irresponsible.

Other prominent scholars joined in criticizing Coleman’s white flight thesis. Gary Orfield delivered a paper at a Brookings Institute symposium in which he stated, “It is impossible now to demonstrate that school integration, in itself, causes substantial white flight (quoted in Pettigrew and Green 1979, p. 153). Christine Rossell (1979) also challenged Coleman’s desegregation research, writing that “school desegregation causes little or no significant white flight,

even when it is court ordered and implemented in large cities” (p. 225). (Rossell later amended her views to acknowledge that desegregation plans did lead to significant white flight under some conditions.) Stanley Robin and James Rosco, two scholars from Western Michigan University, weighed in as well, arguing that Coleman’s research was “seriously flawed” (1976, p. 56). Roy Wilkins and Kenneth Clark also attacked Coleman’s work (Ravitch, 1979, p. 239), and Robert Crain (1976) of the Rand Corporation wrote that white flight from desegregation was not as serious as Coleman had argued.

Finally, Charles Willie, a Harvard professor who has written and consulted on school desegregation issues over a period of many years, rejected the argument that there might soon be too few white children to effectively desegregate urban public schools. “It is my contention,” Willie wrote, “that there are enough whites in central cities now, and there will be in the future, to achieve meaningful desegregation of their public school systems” (1981, p. 126). By 1981, when this statement was published, any Boston parent could have told Willie that this statement was wildly incorrect, at least in the metropolitan area where Willie taught and resided.

A quarter of a century after Coleman’s article was published, it is difficult to comprehend why Coleman’s observations about white flight from inner city schools were so controversial. In retrospect it seems clear that Coleman was basically correct in attributing some white flight to coercive desegregation plans. The Boston experience alone should have told Coleman’s critics that he had identified an important problem. In 1971, before Boston was subjected to a federal court’s desegregation order, there were 57,000 white students in the district. By 1977, the number had dropped to 29,000. David Armor (1980) estimated about three-fifths of this loss (16,000 students) was attributable to desegregation activities (p. 205).

Indeed, data gathered by Christine Rossell, one of Coleman’s earliest critics, would have confirmed Coleman’s central thesis had it been interpreted in a reasonable way. Less than a year after Coleman’s *Phi Delta Kappan* piece appeared, Rossell presented findings that flatly contradicted Coleman, and which concluded that mandatory desegregation plans had minimal impact on white flight. However, as Diane Ravitch, explained in a 1978 issue of *The Public Interest* (reprinted in 1979), Rossell had “selected a statistical method that [would] show small declines even in the face of large absolute movements.”

For example, Rossell reported that San Francisco, which was put under a desegregation order in 1971, experienced relatively minor white enrollment losses in the years immediately before and

immediately after the order was imposed. In the four years prior to the order, white losses as a percentage of total school population were  $-2.9\%$ ,  $-1.2\%$ ,  $0\%$ ,  $-4.1\%$ , and  $.2\%$ . In the two years after the plan was enacted, white losses were  $-3.0$  and  $-2.1$ . Rossell used these figures to support her conclusion that San Francisco had experienced “no significant white flight” as a result of desegregation (quoted by Ravitch 1979, p. 241).

However, if one examines San Francisco’s white enrollment losses in absolute terms during the years immediately before and after its desegregation plan went into effect, it becomes apparent that the city experienced very significant white flight. In 1968, San Francisco had 38,824 white students. Four years later, only 26,067 remained, a loss of 12,757 students, or about one third of the 1968 white enrollment. As Ravitch pointed out, any statistical method that would declare such a loss to be insignificant “is, at the very least, not very useful” (p. 248).

Ravitch then went on to report the white and minority enrollments for the 29 largest school districts in the country for the years 1968 and 1976. All 29 districts had experienced significant declines in white enrollment during those years, ranging from 16.2% in Jacksonville to 78.3% in Atlanta. By 1976, only 8 of the districts were majority white (pp. 250–251). Ravitch admitted that it is impossible to determine with certainty how much of this white flight was a reaction to desegregation. Nevertheless, she argued, it was “unsupportable to claim that there [was] no effect whatsoever” (p. 253).

In short, Rossell, along with several other respected scholars, used sophisticated statistical techniques to discredit Coleman’s white flight thesis, even though any American who possessed the urban school enrollment figures and had eighth grade arithmetic skills could easily discern that Coleman was correct. Why, then, was Coleman so bitterly attacked?

As Ravitch pointed out, the Coleman “white flight” controversy symbolized the struggle over the future direction of school desegregation policy. “Coleman [was] urging a cautious and deliberate approach that takes into account the possibility of ‘white flight’ and resegregation” (p. 253). Coleman’s critics were committed to racial balancing in the schools, without much regard for what the racial makeup of a school district might ultimately be.

Looking back, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Coleman’s critics lost an important opportunity to reevaluate school desegregation strategy when they rejected his concerns about white flight out of hand. Coleman rightly predicted that the desegregation strategies then being used would ultimately lead to a new form of segregation—

a form in which nearly all black inner city districts would be surrounded by suburban schools that are mostly white.

Sadly, 47 years after the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, thousands of minority school children still attend schools in racial isolation as if the Supreme Court had never spoken. As we begin the twenty-first century, *Brown's* promise remains unfulfilled. The question before us then is this: What do we do now?

### **Facing the Truth About Urban Schools**

Before answering that question, it is useful to review the status of urban public education in the opening years of the twenty-first century. Any honest review will show that urban school systems are not healthy organisms with a few minor aches and pains. On the contrary, they are deeply and seriously dysfunctional. We must face that reality before we can decide what to do about the endemic racial isolation of public schools in the inner cities.

#### *Governance and Leadership Problems*

First of all, many inner-city school districts have serious governance and leadership problems. In too many cities, school board members are driven, not by the needs of children, but by racial and ethnic politics (Applebome 1996), patronage, and naked political ambition (Harris 1996, McAdams 2000).

David Rogers's study of the New York City school system, published in 1968, described the New York City Board of Education in terms that might apply to many urban school boards even today. In Rogers's words, the New York City board had shaped a "politics of futility" that allowed it to function in inefficient, unprofessional, and undemocratic ways.

It has an almost unlimited capacity [Rogers wrote] for absorbing protest and externalizing the blame, for confusing and dividing the opposition, "seeming" to appear responsive to legitimate protest by issuing sophisticated and progressive policy statements that are poorly implemented, if at all, and then pointing to all its paper "accomplishments" over the years as evidence both of good faith and effective performance. (p. 13)

In fact, urban school governance has been so bad in recent years that some respect commentators have recommended an end to demo-



cratic control of urban schools (Chubb and Moe 1990; McAdams 2000). In city after city, alternative governance structures have been tried to bring more professionalism to urban school boards. In Boston, for example, the city replaced a system of elected school board members with members appointed by the mayor. Some cities have tried to decentralize power in order to reduce school boards' mischief-making ability. Several states have passed so-called "academic bankruptcy" provisions, permitting state agencies to take over districts that are mismanaged or that have records of substandard student performance. In order to discourage patronage, several states limit school boards' authority over the hiring process.

Thus far, however, legislative efforts to improve urban school governance have had little impact on day-to-day school operations. As one commentator (McDermott 2000, p. 87) pointed out:

In theory, it makes sense to replace the boards of education that currently oversee failing school systems. In practice, the boards themselves often do not control administrators so much as they are controlled by them, and it is difficult to see how replacing one source of top-down oversight with another will improve matters much.

In addition to dysfunctional school boards, many inner-city school systems are shackled with ineffective executive leadership. Urban school superintendents, as Orfield and Eaton (1996) pointed out, seldom keep their positions for more than two or three years. Often they arrive at a school system touting a "brand-new" school reform plan. Too often, these executive educators resign their posts before they can be held accountable for results, frequently forced from office by a capricious school board (Parker 1996).

Public disappointment with traditional urban school administrators has caused many urban systems to look outside the ranks of professional educators for effective leadership (McAdams 2000, p. 255). Los Angeles, for example, the second largest school district in the nation, recently appointed Colorado's former Governor Roemer to be its new superintendent. In the year 2000, the chief executive of the San Diego schools was Alan Bersin, an attorney; and another attorney, Harold Levy, was recently appointed to head the New York school system (Lewin 2000). A least two large urban systems—Seattle and New Orleans—recently chose former military men to be their school superintendent.

Both trends—briefer tenure for urban school executives and the search for leadership outside the education profession—illustrate the problems urban systems are having in finding competent and

effective executive leadership. This problem, along with a trend toward volatile, racially divisive, and politically motivated urban school boards, are major contributors to the phenomenon of increasingly dysfunctional urban school governance.

*Incompetent, Poorly Trained, and “Burned Out” Teachers*

Second, a great many of the educators who staff our urban schools are incompetent, uninspired, or indifferent. Linda Darling-Hammond, who wrote about her early teaching experience in Camden, New Jersey, described an urban teaching environment that is not atypical. As a new teacher, Darling-Hammond “found a crumbling warehouse high school managed by dehumanizing and sometimes cruel procedures, staffed by underprepared and often downright unqualified teachers, an empty book room, and a curriculum so rigid and narrow that teachers could barely stay awake to teach it” (1996, p. 7).

As Darling-Hammond has noted, perhaps a quarter of the teachers hired each year are underprepared for their assignments, “and they are assigned disproportionately to schools and classrooms serving the most educationally vulnerable children” (p. 6). Often our best teachers avoid the inner-city schools or transfer out of them as fast as they can.

Those who remain behind often experience workplace “burnout,” a condition in which the teacher experiences feelings of alienation, helplessness, meaninglessness, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion (Dworkin 1987; Maslach and Jackson 1981). Urban teachers are more likely to experience burnout than suburban teachers. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991), assessing various studies, estimated that between one-third and two thirds of inner-city schoolteachers may be burned out (p. 98).

The reasons for this are plain enough. Inner-city schools have large numbers of socially and economically disadvantaged students. Poverty, racial tension, violence, drugs, and fragmented family life are every-day realities for many of these children; and these conditions make it more difficult for them to learn (LeCompte and Dworkin 1991, p. 108). Teaching such children can be extraordinarily stressful, and teachers are often dissatisfied with the learning outcomes they achieve. Thus it is not surprising that inner-city teachers have especially high burnout rates.

In addition, teachers who are racially isolated in their school setting tend to experience high levels of burnout. Typically, such teachers are found in inner-city schools. In particular, many inner-

city school systems operate according to desegregation plans under the supervision of federal courts. Often these plans require teachers to be assigned to schools by race, in approximately the same proportions as the racial makeup of the district as a whole. Generally, such orders require some white teachers to teach in schools with predominately black student populations. In these situations, teachers may experience mistrust, feelings of isolation, and sense of being unwanted (LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991, pp. 104–105).

Too often, urban administrators practice sloppy recruiting procedures (Murnane et al. 1991) and simply refuse to document and address poor teaching practice. Susan Moore Johnson's classic case study, "The case of Edna Wiley," (1978) is an almost unbelievable description of one urban school system's tolerance of a tenured teacher's bizarre and dysfunctional behavior over a period of many years.

Hand-in-hand with the problem of underprepared, unskilled, and burned out teachers is the "backwardness of curriculum policy" in schools for the poor (Darling-Hammond 1996, p. 7)—in other words, the schools that many African American children attend. "Because of the capacities of their teachers," Darling-Hammond wrote, "most classrooms serving poor and minority children continue to provide students with significantly less engaging and effective learning experiences."

Several scholars have written convincingly about the need for "culturally relevant teaching methods" when teaching African American children (Ladson-Billings 1994; Delpit 1995); and we now have good scholarship on this topic. But a new curriculum, even a culturally relevant curriculum, will not increase learning in an environment where skilled teachers and motivated students are in short supply. In such environments, Richard Elmore wrote, "[s]trict curriculum mandates would seem to hold little promise of increasing student learning, except to reinforce adult influence against a hostile or indifferent clientele, or possibly to tell teachers whose knowledge and skill were low what to teach" (1987, p. 70). Or, as Thomas Sergiovanni (1992, p. 4) put it, too many policymakers, school administrators, and academics have emphasized process over substance—satisfied if they implement the "right method," regardless of whether those methods produce better outcomes for children.

### *General Malaise and Indifference to Children*

Finally, and most disturbingly, many urban school systems seem infected by a general malaise, difficult to describe in a few words,

but characterized by the dilapidated condition of urban school buildings, an inattention to the welfare of students, and an overall climate of indifference. I was struck most forcefully by this phenomenon in 1996, when I inspected school facilities in New Orleans at the request of the American Civil Liberties Union, which had brought a lawsuit against the state of Louisiana in an effort to get more financial resources for several poorly funded Louisiana school districts. My job was to visit randomly selected New Orleans schools, document the state of the schools' physical facilities, and determine whether teachers had proper credentials and adequate textbooks and supplies.

What shocked me the most, as I went from one New Orleans public school to another, was the condition of the restrooms, particularly in the high schools and middle schools. Almost without exception, restroom facilities were unfit for human use. In general, they were unventilated, dirty, smelly, poorly lighted and vile. Students had no privacy while in the restrooms, because toilet doors and stalls had been removed. In most cases, hand-washing sinks and ventilation fans were nonfunctional; and soap, towels, mirrors, and toilet paper were almost always missing. At several schools, officials told me the students simply did not use the school restroom facilities; most preferred to endure physical discomfort rather than enter these truly hellish restrooms.

Not surprisingly, other school conditions were bad as well. Some teachers did not have enough textbooks for their students, and others were using out-of-date books. In school after school, science laboratories had become virtually inoperative due to lack of running water, functioning ventilation hoods, equipment, chemicals, and supplies. Many schools had leaky roofs and broken windows; few were air conditioned or adequately wired for the proper use of computers and instructional technology.

Some of what I saw in New Orleans schools can be explained, at least in part, by a lack of money; but some cannot. Obviously, the city of New Orleans has sufficient resources to provide school children with toilet paper, restroom stalls, soap, and clean, well-ventilated bathrooms. In my mind, the fact that New Orleans did not provide these things has only one explanation—indifference and a lack of respect for the human dignity of a school child.

Of course, one person's observations in a single urban school district cannot stand as an indictment of American urban education in general. But my observations are consistent with what others have observed and described in urban schools across the country. Jonathan Kozol's (1991) descriptions of schools in East Saint Louis,

Chicago, and New York, for example, are wholly consistent with what I saw in New Orleans.

Not only are conditions bad in many inner-city schools, but many urban school leaders seem unable to admit this simple fact. Several of the New Orleans schools I visited had posted cheerfully optimistic posters, prepared by the school district's central office, boasting about lowered dropout rates and improved standardized test scores. These representations were totally inconsistent with the squalid conditions I encountered and with what state education records revealed about the district's on-time graduation rates.

### **What Do We Do Now?**

Ideas about how to improve urban schools are plentiful. Hundreds of books, research articles and scholarly papers have addressed the topic. There are research centers and scholarly journals devoted entirely to urban education. It is fair to say that we have gathered sufficient research on urban school reform; indeed, we may have accumulated more than we need.

It is not the purpose of this essay to add to this list of nostrums for fixing inner-city schools. Instead, I suggest that we examine urban schools from a new perspective—a perspective of cold, stark realism, and that we then attack urban school problems from this new perspective.

First of all, it is time to admit that school desegregation in many urban districts is over. James Coleman's concerns about white flight—made in the early 1970s—were perceptive and accurate. The nation ignored Coleman's warnings and listened to his detractors—Gary Orfield, Christine Rossell, Charles Willie and others; and we need only stroll the corridors of an inner-city high school to see where that decision brought us. In urban districts where white students are substantially in the minority, policymakers, attorneys and judges should quit tinkering with desegregation strategies and let school officials educate students without regard to maintaining racial balance.

I am not suggesting that we retreat from the moral principles of the *Brown* decision. *Brown's* simple holding—that American school children deserve equal educational opportunities regardless of race—is the nation's supreme moral statement of the twentieth century. Moreover, many of the strategies that were developed to implement *Brown*—flawed though some of them turned out to be—still have application in the nation's new large school districts, where a

high percentage of white children go to school with minority school children. Most of these districts are in the South and the West.

Nevertheless, in cities like Atlanta, Dallas, Detroit, Memphis, New Orleans, Washington, DC and a string of other cities, we must admit that most black children attend school in racial isolation and that this reality is not going to change in our lifetimes. In those communities, the job of the schools is to prepare children who live and study in racial isolation for the opportunities that exist in the larger world.

Second, we must face another stark reality about inner-city schools. Outside the selective, magnet-style schools, education in the minority-dominated urban districts is on the verge of collapse. Educational researchers tend to portray urban schools as basically sound educational environments, which only need a bit of policy advice and guidance to function at a higher level of adequacy. This is not correct. Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* paints a true portrait of the typical inner-city school; and it is a picture of squalor, chaos, and indifference to children's needs. Any researcher or policymaker who offers a rosier picture is not providing useful or accurate information.

Finally, we must face a third stark reality about urban education: school desegregation failed in the inner cities for essentially one reason: many of the people who implemented it—judges, attorneys, court-appointed experts, school board members, union officials, and professional educators—never intended to disturb the status quo of public education. Thus, the long years since *Brown v. Board of Education* are a history of mechanical and ineffective remedies—forced busing, magnet schools, race-based staffing ratios, special intervention programs for “at risk students,” etc.—while African American children continued to huddle in racially isolated schools where they could not even decently go to the bathroom. During all this time, the teachers' unions, urban school boards, state education departments, and affluent suburban school districts continued doing business as usual.

Paulo Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), which is based on his experience with repressive Latin American regimes, is useful for understanding why fifty years of school desegregation has been so ineffective. According to Freire, the oppressors (in this case the education industry's various special interest groups) can never be relied upon to liberate the oppressed.

The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liber-

ate either the oppressed or themselves. . . . Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity,” which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. (p. 44)

Thus, school desegregation became “an instrument of dehumanization,” which began with the “egoistic interests of the oppressors” and which made the oppressed the objects of paternalistic humanitarianism (p. 54). (In fact, false generosity probably explains why liberal minded social scientists reacted so negatively to James Coleman’s accurate observation in the early 1970s that school desegregation was simply not working.)

In Freire’s view, the liberation of the oppressed can never be achieved through the “false charity” of the oppressor. It can only be achieved when the oppressed recognize the reality of their oppression and begin working toward the transformation of the world, of themselves, and of their oppressors. For Freire, this transformational work by the oppressed is an act of love that restores not only their own humanity, but also the humanity of their oppressors as well (1970, p. 56).

Obviously, Freire’s work is deeply moral. It is not surprising that his work has found expression in liberation theology, which has greatly influenced Catholic thought, particularly in Latin America. Is it possible that Freire’s vision of liberation for the oppressed could be introduced into school desegregation policy? More specifically, is it possible, that education policy makers might allow inner-city families to take control of their children’s educational destinies themselves, instead of being forced to rely on the “false generosity” of the courts and the special interest groups that have controlled the school desegregation process throughout its 50-year history?

It seems unlikely. Indeed, most mainstream educational scholars and policymakers recoil from any proposal that would radically alter the basic status quo in public education. This view largely explains the deep resistance of educational constituencies to voucher proposals, which are seen as an insidious plot to undermine the public schools.

This is unfortunate, because school desegregation has been a disaster in the inner cities. False generosity—court-imposed desegregation remedies, advice from so-called desegregation experts, and

the policies implemented by various education agencies—have left the inner city school schools racially isolated and dysfunctional. To solve this calamity, the oppressed themselves must have the power to throw off oppression—and this includes the power to choose an alternative to public education.

In other words, the transformation of inner-city education depends, and depends quite heavily, on the adoption of some form of vouchers and family choice. In particular, inner-city families should have access to Catholic parochial schools—institutions that recognize the humanity of oppressed children as an act of faith.

So far, public opinion is hotly divided about voucher programs that include religious schools; and the courts have not offered much encouragement. Indeed, Justice Clarence Thomas, in *Mitchell v. Helms* (2000), bluntly suggested that the courts' hostility to public funding for religious education is based not on high-minded concerns about the separation of church and state, but anti-Catholic bigotry.

But the public and judicial climate may change. After all, Canada permits government support of church-sponsored schools, and no one can seriously argue that Canadian education has been hurt by that practice. Two things are certain: the status quo is not an option for public education in the inner cities, and current desegregation strategies have not worked for inner city children. We are now faced with two choices—we can continue to engage in false generosity—implementing a failed school desegregation policy while refusing inner-city families any alternatives to the public education's status quo. Or we can insist on decent education for racially isolated inner-city school children. If we choose the second option, it is time for American education policy to become more welcoming to vouchers, family choice, and religious schools.

## References

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