SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

The Resegregation of America's Schools

In September 1957, it took the Army's 101st Airborne Division to enforce a court order admitting nine Black students to Little Rock's all-white Central High School. Three decades later, the school district was embroiled in a new desegregation case. This time it was the district that went to court in an attempt to cope with its new problem of "resegregation."

In 1957, Little Rock's school population was 74 percent white and 26 percent Black; in 1987, it was 71 percent Black and 29 percent white – a shift which makes racially balanced schools an elusive goal. Little Rock proposed a consolidation of city schools with two suburban districts but the court wouldn't go that far. It ordered a limited expansion of the Little Rock district to include 14 predominantly white suburban schools.

The court's solution will ease the situation for awhile but school officials worry that they face a vicious cycle. "What everyone wants is some stability," observed Willie D. Hamilton, the city's first Black School Board president. "If this trend of resegregation continues and the district is not merged with others, we're just going to be back in court for yet another court order."

Meanwhile, in Charlotte, North Carolina, one of the first school systems to use busing for desegregation, a city-county exchange of students maintains a ceiling of 50 percent minority enrollment in all city high schools. Although the city is frequently cited as a model of successful integration, another, more insidious form of resegregation has taken hold. In each of the city's 10 high schools, academic classes are predominantly white while vocational and slow-learner classes are predominantly Black.

"There is a very strong relation between racial segregation and economic segregation, drop out rates, low test scores, college entrance rates and other factors that have real consequences in an adult's life."

"At the end of the bus ride, where are we at?" asks a local Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader. "Somebody's given up on us."

Neither Little Rock's predicament nor Charlotte's failing are unusual. In school districts across the country children are systematically segregated by race and class, and if the schools cannot be wholly blamed for creating the "underclass," they surely are responsible for reinforcing it.

Educators, policy-makers, business leaders, and youth advocates have all raised the alarm in the last few years about the high dropout rates among Black, Latino, and Native American youth—50 to 85 percent in many cities. The social and economic consequences are well documented: high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, to live in poverty, to be stuck in low-paying, low-skilled jobs, and to be imprisoned. The National Education Association estimates that the cost of the high dropout rate is more than $75 billion a year in lost tax revenues, crime and crime-prevention costs, welfare, and unemployment.

Unfortunately, while concern has grown, more attention has been focused on the personal characteristics of the dropouts—the "defective" student—than on the defects of the schools. Analysts who blame the victims ignore ample evidence that students don't simply drop out; they are pushed out by the policies of an educational system which fails to educate minority students even if they stay in school.

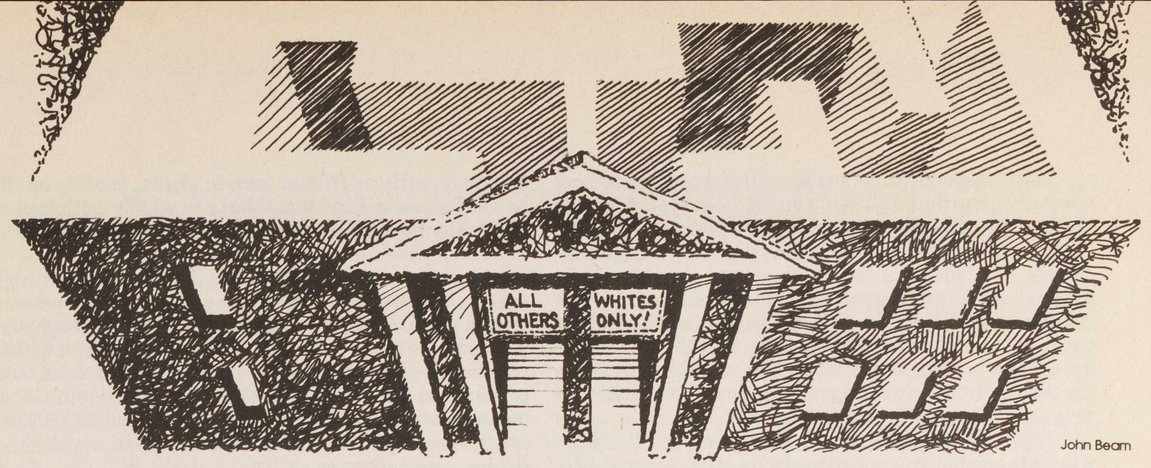
Americans still cling to a belief that education is the key to success. But a report entitled "School Segregation in the 1980s" argues convincingly that because of racial and economic segregation in the schools the children of the urban underclass "have no viable connection to any paths of mobility in education or employment."

The study, directed by Gary Orfield, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, documented the resegregation trend. He found that the nation's precarious progress toward school desegregation stalled in the early 1970s and suffered setbacks in the Reagan years. On a nationwide basis, Blacks held onto earlier gains but saw no real improvement in school desegregation between 1972 and 1984, while over the same period, Latino school children were increasingly isolated in virtually all parts of the country.

Thirty years after the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, 63.5 percent of Black students attended predominantly minority public schools—those at which at least half of the students are minorities. In some states, the percentage was considerably higher: 84 percent in Illinois, for example; 83.3 percent in Michigan; and 81.7 percent in New York. Southern states, on the other hand, which once practiced "absolute segregation" had the highest levels of integration, according to the study.

Latino students fared worse than Blacks. Nationwide, the percentage of Latino students attending predominantly minority schools rose from 54.8 percent in 1968 to 70.6 percent in 1984. The proportion of Hispanic students in intensely segregated schools—those with at least 90 percent minority enrollment—rose from 23.1 percent to 31 percent. New York, Illinois, and Texas had the highest segregation rates for Latinos; Puerto Ricans in New York were the most segregated students in the entire country.

Part of the problem is demographic. Latino enrollment in public schools shot up 80 percent from 1968 to 1984. Given such rapid growth and the concentration of Latinos in a few metropolitan areas "You would automatically have an increase in segregation unless something was done to offset it," Orfield said. But, he noted, neither the federal government nor the states have made much of an effort.



John Beam

Demographics are a major factor in the segregation of Black students as well, particularly where "white flight" has intensified residential segregation. But, as the judge in the Little Rock case pointed out, white flight doesn't just happen. It is fostered by complicity between school districts, real estate developers, and others intent on avoiding integration.

Battles Over Busing

"The six most integrated metropolitan areas," Orfield observed, "were under the very kind of large-scale mandatory inter-district desegregation plans that have been so frequently targeted for special criticism." In recent years the criticism has come directly from the White House. While it has not fulfilled conservative dreams of a constitutional amendment banning busing, the Reagan Administration's position on desegregation has been openly hostile. Reagan and his policy makers have taken the "color blind" view that any active efforts beyond the elimination of discriminatory laws constitute "illegitimate" racial distinctions.

Putting that principle into practice, the Justice Department has led the attack on mandatory desegregation, regularly defending state anti-busing legislation and declining to support remedies which include busing. In 1985, the Justice Department eased federal standards for determining whether school systems can be considered desegregated and therefore released from court-ordered busing.

SCHOOL PROFILES

City (number of students in thousands)	Minorities % of students that are Black and Latino	Dropouts % who enter 9th but leave before 4 years	Counselors Ratio to high school students
Boston (56)	63%	46%	1/313
Chicago (431)	83%	45%	1/398
Houston (192)	81%	41%	1/500
Los Angeles (592)	75%	45%	1/298
Miami (255)	75%	NA	1/420
New York (939)	72%	34%	1/623
St. Louis (47)	76%	30%	1/390

Source: *Time Magazine*

Once a court order is vacated, desegregation cases must start from scratch, proving discriminatory intent, not just discriminatory effect. That places a heavy burden on civil rights organizations like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund which continue to pursue court remedies, sometimes in the same cities where major desegregation battles were fought and won decades ago.

In the 1980s, supporters tend to argue for desegregation on more practical than moral grounds. Integrated schools have been shown to have positive effects. A 15-year study by the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University found that Black students who attended racially mixed schools were more likely to have higher test scores, to graduate from high school, to attend predominantly white colleges, and to complete more years of college. "All our research shows that there is a very strong relation between racial segregation and economic segregation, dropout rates, low test scores, college entrance rates and other factors that have real consequences in an adult's life," Orfield summarized.

Available evidence also indicates that where minority children are still concentrated in predominantly minority schools, they are severely handicapped by an unequal distribution of resources. Minority schools have less funds, less experienced teachers, more crowded classrooms, older textbooks, poorer maintenance, and fewer academic course offerings than white schools. In Chicago, for example, of 36 schools considered overcrowded, 33 are in Latino neighborhoods. In Los Angeles, a recent study revealed that predominantly white schools spent $500 more per student than predominantly Latino schools and $300 more per student than predominantly Black schools.

The Wrong Track

Despite all the positive things that can be said for integrated schools, however, situations like Charlotte's demonstrate that desegregation by itself does not achieve what its advocates hoped: quality education for minority children. From the early days of the *Brown* decision, critics have contended that school desegregation undertaken solely for the purpose of integration would have devastating effects on Black children if they were treated as second class citizens in their new schools. Now it appears that their worst fears have come true.