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We have a problem with our public schools. Our collective slide behind other industrialized countries on international tests and the persistent achievement gap between white students and minority students both made their way into the 2008 presidential debates, even though neither candidate really said much about education besides the obvious “we need to improve our schools.” The debate over how to best improve our public schools is a fascinating one because it doesn’t split along party lines. Teachers unions have historically aligned with the Democratic Party, but the Democrats are also supporters of education reform, which the teachers unions find problematic. Republicans want more accountability and more school choice, but so does Obama, in many ways. Many catchy terms get thrown around when education is discussed: accountability, charter schools, choice, Common Core, and standards are among the many references to potential solutions toward helping our failing public schools find success. But one huge problem within America’s public education system, which is perhaps the root cause of all other struggles, is largely ignored. That issue is school segregation.

There is no “silver bullet” solution to all the problems within our public education system. No one small change, whether that change be increased standards, more charter schools, or teacher accountability, will make much of a difference. But integrating schools along race and class lines, while taking a monumental effort on behalf of the government and our country’s citizens, will do the most to end the problems of inequity that have plagued our public schools for decades. In this paper, I will outline the court decisions that stopped integration before it really got off the ground, explain why segregated schools have been and will always be unequal, and then explain why current education reform agendas, both on the right and the left, fail to acknowledge segregation as a continuing problem. In so doing, I hope to show that race and class are still barriers to success in our public schools, and perhaps to convince a few of you to think into the future (or perhaps the present if you’re one of the adults in the room) about the choices you will have to make for your own children when it is time to send them to school.

I assume most of you have heard about Brown v. Board of Education, the 1954 Supreme Court decision that declared separate schools inherently unequal. The anniversary of this landmark decision is celebrated every year as an example of America’s commitment to equal opportunity and fairness for all citizens. Since 1954, however, several court decisions have blocked if not erased the efforts laid out in Brown to provide equal educational opportunities for all children.

The Supreme Court itself changed dramatically between 1954 and the time of its next major decision related to school desegregation in Milliken v. Bradley twenty years later. Gary Orfield, currently a professor of education, law, and urban planning at UCLA, has studied the negative effects of segregation in schools for years. He co-edited Dismantling Segregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education, in which he outlines the changes in the Supreme Court that have led to the state of public education today. He points out that all Supreme Court appointees in the 1970s and 1980s were chosen by Republican presidents “whose campaigns had promised a more conservative judiciary and weaker civil rights policies (p. 4)” than those that had existed in the 1960s. President Nixon alone appointed four justices, including William Rehnquist in 1971, who later went on to become the Court’s Chief Justice. Orfield argues that “when the Rehnquist Court was firmly installed by the end of the 1980s, the stage would be set
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for dismantling desegregation” (p. 9). Gerald Grant, professor of education at Syracuse University and author of *Hope and Despair in the American City*, further contends that Nixon is largely responsible for the reversal of *Brown*. Tapes from the Nixon administration recorded Nixon discussing potential appointees, about which he said, “I don’t care if he’s a Democrat or a Republican…within the definition of conservative, he must be against busing, and against forced housing integration…Beyond that, he can do what he pleases” (p. 151). With this mindset carried out through his appointments, the landscape for change in public education was dramatically altered.

By the 1970s, the issue of segregated public schools had become an issue in the North as well, bringing a new type of diversity case to the Supreme Court. In *Milliken v. Bradley*, a case focused on schools in Detroit, the Court ruled that “federal affirmative action could be applied only to schools that had shown clear *de jure* discrimination,” which meant that courts could use the power from *Brown* to order desegregation only in “school districts with a history of explicit discrimination, effectively ignoring *de facto* racism” (Crawford and O’Neill, p. 513). The NAACP had complained that the Detroit’s schools were segregated. The Supreme Court ruled, however, that unless a district had explicit policies that created segregation in its schools, there was no requirement to make schools more integrated. Gerald Grant argues that “more than any other single factor, the Detroit ruling ensured that black and poor children in cities…would continue to be segregated and that city school systems would have no power to merge with suburban schools” (p. 145). Gary Orfield claims that the result of this decision was the construction of “a massive legal barrier between city school districts and the surrounding suburban districts, where most White children resided and where typically the best schools were located,” effectively ending hopes of true desegregation in the North (Frankenberg and Orfield, p. 1-2).

As a result of *Milliken*, schools in the North remained more segregated than schools in the South through the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, however, three separate decisions collectively called the “Resegregation Trilogy” allowed southern schools to relax their integration policies as well. *Board of Education v. Dowell* in 1991, *Freeman v. Pitts* in 1992, and *Missouri v. Jenkins* in 1995 all involved slightly different rulings, but in the end, as Orfield explains, the Court had effectively ruled that “school districts need not prove actual racial equality, nor a narrowing of academic gaps between the races” to avoid court ordered remedies. These rulings, Orfield notes, meant that “desegregation remedies can even be removed when achievement gaps between the races have widened, or even if a district has never fully implemented an effective desegregation plan. Formalistic compliance for a time with some limited requirements was enough, even if the roots of racial inequality were untouched” (Orfield and Eaton, p. 4). In effect, true desegregation was no longer considered an end goal; it was treated as a punishment that had to be endured for a short period before the courts removed oversight.

While the Resegregation Trilogy ended federal oversight of desegregation efforts before districts were truly diverse, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* in 2007 blocked the attempts of two school districts to participate in voluntary desegregation procedures. Schools in Seattle and Jefferson County were simultaneously using voluntary plans that considered race as a factor in school placement. After the decision was flipped several times
in lower courts, the Supreme Court ultimately decided that “the plans were designed to achieve racial balance and that racial balancing alone was not a legitimate objective” (Crawford and O’Neill, p. 519). Journalist Tim Lockette argues that this decision “effectively gutted Brown by declaring that school districts can’t consider racial diversity as a factor in school assignments” (web). If school districts cannot consciously look at the racial composition of their student bodies, they have no way to desegregate their schools.

In their entirety, these post-Brown decisions have made true desegregation more difficult and have, in many cases, actually led to the resegregation of schools that were on their way to becoming more diverse. Supporters of the decisions discussed above will often say things like race shouldn’t matter, so it doesn’t make sense to consider it. The problem with this colorblind attitude, however, is that race still does matter, nowhere more so than in our public schools. As Gary Orfield asserts, “We must break the simpleminded assumption that we can succeed by merely ignoring racial and ethnic issues” (Orfield and Frankenberg, p. 294) because we have tried that for over 50 years, and inequalities in our schools have only gotten worse. In our nation, race is inextricably linked to class, so a school that is largely African American or Latino is often a school of concentrated poverty, meaning that these students lack the financial and personal networks that middle-class children use every day to navigate their world (Orfield and Eaton, p. xv). In fact, as of 2010, “one-third of all black and Latino students attend high-poverty schools (where more than 75 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch); only 4 percent of white children do” (Lockette, web).

Desegregating schools isn’t just about getting African American kids to sit next to white kids; it’s about distributing resources more equitably. Because of the way public schools are funded, financial resources will never be equally distributed across school districts. The reason for the gross inequalities between districts right next door to each other can be traced to the practice of redlining, instituted immediately after the Great Depression. Gerald Grant gives an overview of redlining in Hope and Despair in the American City. Basically, banks started a practice of outlining neighborhoods on maps based on how desirable an area was projected to be. Wealthy, homogenously white neighborhoods were outlined in blue or green, meaning they were “safe.” Neighborhoods outlined in red were considered investment risks. Any neighborhood that had even one black family living in it was immediately “redlined,” marking it as undesirable, and encouraging mortgage lenders to shy away from providing fairly priced loans to home buyers in that area. As a result, white, middle-class families moved out of these neighborhoods and refused to buy houses there, dropping property values and isolating African Americans (Grant, p. 14-15). Over time, the tax base in these neighborhoods plummeted, robbing the local public schools of the financial resources they needed. Middle-class African Americans began leaving these neighborhoods as well in order to get their children into suburban public schools, isolating the remaining residents by class as well as race. This geographic isolation essentially incapacitated urban school districts, making these districts even less appealing for families that had the means and the resources to leave.

To prove how important school integration is for the success of our nation’s poor minority students, I want to reference a case study that was the focus of Gerald Grant’s Hope and Despair in the American City. Grant compared the City of Syracuse, which has not succeeded in integrating its schools, to Raleigh, a city that implemented a creative system to encourage
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voluntary integration. When he completed his study in 2003, only 25 percent of 8th graders in the Syracuse school district passed their state tests. In Raleigh, where, as Grant explains, “city and suburbs had merged to form a single countywide school system that served children of all social classes and races, 91 percent passed” (Grant, p. 91). Raleigh’s success rate skyrocketed after it made a conscious effort to integrate its schools because, as Julianne Hing explains, “researchers have found that desegregation, while always thorny politically, is one of the most direct methods for raising the education achievement of students of color, especially those that are poor” (Hing, web). When students from low-income backgrounds are exposed to the resources and networks kids in the middle class take for granted, they see success. It does more to make good on what Grant calls “an implicit bargain that America made with its poorest citizens,” the promise that “equal educational opportunities for all” would even out the inherent income differences in a capitalist economy (Grant, p. 92). We pride ourselves on having a democratic society, and guaranteeing integrated schools would do more to accomplish that mission.

A critic would be hard pressed to argue against the idea that desegregating schools is beneficial for impoverished minorities, but there are those who say schooling is a zero-sum game. If we help African American and Hispanic children by placing them in schools with their middle-class peers, those middle-class students will inevitably suffer, critics say. But research shows that is not true. In fact, I would argue that our white middle-class students, myself included, are missing out on important life lessons by going to segregated public K-12 schools. Erica Frankenburg makes the point that “public elementary and secondary schools remain one of the few public institutions in which most people participate,” so they “offer an important opportunity in a still-segregated society to encounter and learn from people of other racial/ethnic backgrounds” (Orfield and Frankenberg, p. 23). John A. Powell and Rebecca High take this argument a step further, claiming that the only way to promote true democracy is to have schools that treat all students as equals, and thereby teach all kids at a young age that we are a country that offers “a model of universal membership” (Powell and High, p. 265-266). White students who come from white suburbs where they had all white teachers and white classmates have a hard time grasping the inequalities in our country and how those inequalities are threats to our nation’s ideals. They may also have a hard time interacting with and understanding citizens from different cultures once they break out of their suburban bubbles. Mark D. Rosenbaum, chief counsel to the American Civil Liberties Union in Los Angeles, put it well when he said, “Is it possible to learn calculus in a segregated school? Of course it is…Is it possible to learn how the world operates and to think creatively about the rich diversity of cultures in this country? It is impossible” (Rich, web).

While strong evidence exists to suggest that we need to do more to integrate our schools, no politicians or education reformers are really suggesting this as a strategy. Instead, many are providing solutions that aim to gloss over or ignore the inequalities inherent in the current system. The standards and accountability movement that we are all familiar with today took root in 1983, following a report from Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education called A Nation at Risk. This report did a lot to change the way we think about public education, but perhaps the most significant thing in the report was the idea that, as Orfield puts it, “the social context of schools could be overlooked—both the problems of racial and economic inequality and the positive possibilities of racial diversity” (Orfield and Frankenberg, p. 5). As he explains, A Nation at Risk promoted the idea that imposing tough standards and sanctions on
schools would provide good results for everyone, regardless of their racial and/or economic situation (p. 5).

Eighteen years after *A Nation at Risk* was published, the “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001 infused mainstream prescriptions for education reform with this ideology when George W. Bush signed it into law, following its nearly unanimous passage through Congress. It was hard to argue with a policy that said we would make no excuses when it came to the success of our children. All children would succeed, regardless of external situations. The law called for standardized test scores to be considered by racial and economic category so that no minority or disadvantaged groups of children would be allowed to slide by. As Orfield explains, “NCLB had strong goals and sweeping sanctions for equalizing achievement among minority and White children,” which was lauded across the country, but it “had no requirement to equalize the very unequal schooling opportunities or to take any action to end segregation of minority students in inferior schools and improve race relations” (p. 5). To say that all kids can achieve is great, and most people would have a hard time arguing against that rhetoric, but it has become an excuse for some to avoid dealing with the actual inequalities in our schools and in our neighborhoods.

In fact, ignoring these inequalities in the name of saying all kids can succeed has arguably hurt many schools that lack resources. Jonathan Kozol, a prolific writer about the plight of urban schools and author of *The Shame of the Nation*, is a harsh critic of *No Child Left Behind* and its “solutions” for our struggling children. He argues that “Higher standards, higher expectations, are insistently demanded of these urban principals, and of their teachers and the students in their schools, but far lower standards certainly in ethical respects appear to be expected of the dominant society that isolates these children in unequal institutions” (p. 34). When we ask students in these schools to repeat mantras like “If it is to be, it’s up to me,” Kozol argues we are making them tell lies to themselves at a young age (p. 35). He calls rhetoric like this “place-markers” which function to “tell us we are in a world where hope must be constructed therapeutically because so much of it has been destroyed by the conditions of internment in which we have placed these children” (p. 37). We are telling these kids they have a chance at the American Dream if they just work hard, but then we as a nation are refusing to take down the obstacles that white, middle-class students never even have to consider.

Many school reform advocates today use this “higher expectations” rhetoric. President Obama’s Race to the Top, Teach For America, KIPP charter schools, and so many others make the argument that we can get kids to succeed in school, regardless of their circumstances. I am not trying to say that we should throw this rhetoric out the window. I am a big supporter of Teach For America, and I am working next year in a charter school that serves a student population that is 97% minority, and where 75% of its students receive free or reduced-price lunch. I think we need to do everything we can to help the kids who are growing up in isolated pockets of poverty right now overcome the challenges that I never faced, and never will have to face, so that they can have the same opportunities that were basically handed to me. But we can’t stop there. But we can’t allow this rhetoric to blind us to the true problems of school segregation and how that makes schools that are just unfair.

I don’t have an easy solution to this problem, and I’m assuming that’s because one doesn’t exist. Part of the reason finding a solution is so difficult is because so many people refuse
to recognize race as a problem anymore. Even within our own college community, I have seen a blindness to the need for diversity. Just last semester, *The College Reporter* published an op-ed piece about Posse scholars at our school, questioning whether striving for a more diverse student body was “worth it.” Besides the fact that the article was factually inaccurate, it also completely ignored problems like white privilege and the obstacles that students in the Posse program have to overcome to get to schools like F&M. But honestly, I was most disappointed by the lack of discussion that followed the publication of this article, at least among students. So few of us know how to talk about race and diversity in a real life setting. Sure, many of us can talk about it in class, but point to an example on our own campus, and people are too afraid to say anything for fear of upsetting someone. If that’s not evidence for the fact that white middle-class students, as well as poor minority students, are suffering from segregation in our public schools, I don’t know what is.

Our Supreme Court agreed in 1954 that separate schools were inherently unequal, and since then, many in our nation have based the promise of democracy on the fact that every child has access to public education. At the same time that we have applauded the idea of equal opportunity for all, however, court cases from *Milliken v. Bradley* in the 1970s to *Parents Involved in Community Schools* in 2007 have worked to resegregate schools, isolating largely poor and minority children away from their middle-class peers. Despite compelling data proving that integrated schools are good for all of our students, politicians and reformers have looked for any and all solutions that ignore the root of the problem. Truly integrating schools will not be easy. We will have to rethink how schools are funded and how districts are drawn, and some kids may have to take longer bus rides back and forth to school. It will take many brave parents to stand up and demand that their children attend a school that is both well-funded and diverse before systemic change will happen. I hope our generation is the one that demands that change. If we don’t, we will continue to compromise the promise of equal opportunity that we teach our kids to believe at the start of every school day.
References


