

# *THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION*

## *Equity, School Improvement, and Accountability*

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### **WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED: ELUSIVE PROMISES?**

Although public opinion generally supports desegregation in principle, the political climate with regard to its implementation has been daunting at best.

Desegregation began with litigation culminating in the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which gave legal meaning to the idea that segregated education was inherently unequal. Due to its widespread social and cultural implications, *Brown* was perceived as a threat. Nearly 50 years after the *Brown* decision, the debate on desegregation continues as few substantial changes have been noted in the education of minority students.

Although the demographics may reflect a better racial balance in some settings, academic outcomes for minority youth have been consistently low.

Expectations ranged widely from remedying inequities in educational resources (Kaufman, 1991) to increasing academic performances of African American students and from engineered interracial socialization (Braddock, 1985) to ensuring parity between African Americans and European Americans in levels of educational attainment (Willie, 1984). Regardless of the initial expectations and perceptions of its purposes, school districts desegregating their schools had varied results. These variations were usually attributed to voluntary or court-mandated plans, timing of the decision, and methods used for desegregation. A significant element in any desegregation effort is the level of commitment of various stakeholders to the process.

Desegregation policy has shown an amazing resilience, withstanding several noteworthy attempts to abandon and even reverse it (Vergon, 1990). The struggle to translate the court's words into educational excellence and equity



for all students continues today. As school desegregation proceeded across the country, it caused a fundamental change in the organization of school curricula. Thus, schools responded by developing special programs with federal funds and renewed interest in areas such as bilingual instruction and multicultural education. Critics of desegregation propose that various programs and expectations for different students in the same school resulted in resegregation problems and reinforced stereotypes. For instance, tracking can defeat desegregation by creating vastly different programs and expectations for different students in the same school.

To address this inequity issue, school boards in Detroit, Milwaukee, and New York City established African identity schools in the early 1990s. An Afrocentric curriculum was used initially only for male students. However, due to legal challenges based on Title IX, the schools accepted both sexes.

This article provides a context for analyzing and reviewing the effect of desegregation on equity, school improvement, and accountability. The author explores the future direction of desegregation relevant to issues of equity in the new millennium and a renewed policy agenda in light of the realities of urban schools and current reform initiatives.

### EFFECT OF FEDERAL INVOLVEMENT

Since the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Brown* holding that state-sanctioned racial school segregation was a violation of the Constitution, much attention has been focused on school desegregation under state or federal court supervision. The history of federal involvement in desegregation policy suggests that until the gaps that characterize Black-White access, equitable treatment, and attainment in education are eliminated, the issue will simply not disappear from the public policy debate for any appreciable period of time (Vergon, 1990). During the past decades, desegregation policy would seem to have been dealt several deathblows; however, expectations of its early demise is premature. American schools have had to deal with many difficult challenges in the past decades, including the desegregation of previously segregated schools, which has had a major impact on organization in the schools. Whether due to a court order, political pressure, or demographic changes, many schools now have more heterogeneous student populations than they did in the past. The impact of desegregated schools on the performance, behavior, and attitudes of the students who attend them is a key concern. It is important to regard desegregation as a process that goes beyond merely creating racially mixed schools to creating environments that produce

both academic and social gains for students. Research proposes that it is time to transition from the racial composition of schools to effective schools that focus on academic quality.

Schofield's (1991) comprehensive review of the desegregation literature suggests that the failure of studies in this area has been their attention to the effects of desegregation while ignoring more salient questions such as what actually works and how it is being implemented. Basically, school desegregation has proceeded with the guidance of few, if any, principles. With the rapid increase in the "browning" of the nation's urban centers, the most elaborate desegregation plans cannot be successfully implemented in cities in which White flight and the exercise of private school choice have meant that those once labeled a minority now constitute the school population's numerical majority. Schofield (1991) suggests that researchers fail to provide usable insights concerning desegregation's effects because this work tends to be atheoretical. It is possible that shortcuts have been taken in the presentation of information with regard to desegregation, and the examination of important and complex aspects of the desegregation process have been inadequate.

In addition to setting forth principles with regard to who shall be educated, federal and state governments should develop, promulgate, and monitor principles pertaining to how to organize school systems for the effective delivery of education. Such work requires research and planning activities that localities are less able and less likely to undertake without support. As previously stated, key stakeholders must be involved in this process because they are instrumental to the change agenda.

### **SCHOOL REFORM AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT**

Schofield (1996) posits that the importance of creating desegregated schools that foster students' academic achievement is self-evident. He further suggests that the goal of providing students with a strong academic background has often been the primary motivation of African Americans and other non-Whites advocating desegregation (Bell, 1980; Sizemore, 1978). Accordingly, the focus should be on the promotion of positive intergroup relations in schools as opposed to strategies that hold promise for increasing academic achievement. Several researchers (e.g., E. Cohen, 1984; Haynes & Comer, 1990; Miller, 1980; Slavin, 1983) have written about such strategies, such as curricula that are organized relevant to social issues that address race, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability; instruction; and other school

practices relevant to the needs and interests of its diverse student population. According to Tate, Ladson-Billings, and Grant (1996), educational reform that includes educational equity and excellence for all students cannot occur without a vision of what desegregated and integrated schools would be like.

As school desegregation proceeded across the country, it caused fundamental changes in the organization of school curricula with the introduction of the educational reform known as school choice (e.g., magnet or alternative schools). Spring (1989) notes that magnet or alternative schools are designed to provide an attractive program that will have wide appeal throughout a school district. In principle, magnet schools will attract enough students from all racial backgrounds to achieve integrated schools. One of the great attractions of magnet schools, and a major reason for their success, is that they provide a means of voluntary desegregation. Theoretically, the belief is that these schools will reduce the flight of middle-class and White families from school districts undergoing desegregation. The basic premise is that by providing unique and attractive programs, school districts will retain their populations as voluntary desegregation takes place. The federal government has supported the concept of magnet schools. The 1976 amendments to the Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA, 1989) provided financial support specifically for magnet school programs. In addition, President Ronald Reagan's administration in 1984 used magnet-school plans as its method of achieving out-of-court settlements of desegregation cases.

Opponents assert that magnet schools and choice plans have the potential to lead to greater inequities in schools because they would result in a "cream-ing" of the best students and teachers from traditional public schools, thus leading to further segregation of the school system by race and income and leaving the public schools a dumping ground for disadvantaged and at-risk students. Hoxby (1998) argues that choice could help reduce segregation by breaking the link between housing and schooling. In theory, choice would enable low-income families access to a greater array of schooling options outside of segregated neighborhoods, which could help stem White flight from urban centers. Currently, there is much debate but little conclusive evidence with regard to the effect of choice on student achievement.

Schooling is a complex endeavor with multiple outcomes, and it is possible that some schools with high overall levels of achievement do not contribute a great deal of "value-added" to student achievement (Goldhaber, 1999). The bottom line is that it is not immediately clear whether differences in performance between traditional public schools and alternative schools are a direct result of the delivery of education or the result of differences in the backgrounds of public school students versus their alternative school counterparts.

Henderson, Greenburg, Schneider, Uribe, and Verdugo (1996) conclude that studying desegregation as a quality of school variable is probably a mistake. Desegregation cannot be treated as if it were a uniform program in all racially mixed schools. As stated previously, it is a complex process that needs to be studied cautiously. Racial balance does not necessarily affect power structures or attitudes within schools (E. Cohen, 1984). Henderson et al. (1996) concluded that desegregation's effect on African American student achievement may vary with type of student, school, community, and other related factors. Therefore, it is impossible to identify a single effect but, rather, strategies that may help or hinder progress of students. School improvement must become the ultimate goal.

Crain and Wells (1994) report that desegregation does indeed improve achievement. Desegregation produces the greatest academic benefits when it begins early, which supports early intervention with young children because the most rapid gains in achievement tend to occur in the early primary grades. An interesting fact is that the achievement of African American students is highest in schools that are predominantly White and middle class and in which African Americans are at least 20% of the student body. Crain and Wells (1994) attribute the gains to the resources and standards available in middle-class settings, which usually have better teachers and more demanding programs. Therefore, it is possible that successful desegregation can raise a student's academic achievement. Although the agenda calls for integration of students, the reality is that demographics and politics have left many students in segregated schools.

#### **EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

Participants in the contemporary discourse on K-12 education reform make frequent references to new accountability, authentic educational accountability, and performance-based accountability (D. K. Cohen, 1996; Elmore, Abelman, & Fuhrman, 1996; Tucker & Clark, 1999). These concepts refer to current trends that emphasize an increased scrutiny of school performance and consequences for that performance. For most stakeholders in education, the emphasis is on accountability of results or the specific instruction outcomes. Developing new educational accountability systems focused on performance is a complex business, and successful implementation requires adequate capacity on the part of the entity charged with oversight and the entity being held accountable (D. K. Cohen, 1996). The startling

reality is that most states have yet to develop accountability systems that are "clear, fair and complete" ("Quality Counts '99," 1999, p. 5). Accountability systems for alternative schools (e.g., charter schools) are in various stages of development, and they tend to represent an incremental reform evolving unevenly along a continuum of autonomy.

Advocates for equitable schooling must encourage and support new reform initiatives that promote a restructuring in the current manner in which schools operate, the implementation of policies promoting just and equitable educational opportunities for all of our children, and a transformation of federal desegregation policy into local practices across all districts, especially urban centers.

## CONCLUSION

Because of variations among education settings, perhaps it is unrealistic to seek a model program. A number of viable and effective programs can coexist.

Therefore, a true vision of a desegregated school is not realistic; however, it is realistic to discern the instruction, curriculum, and practices of schools for these schools to be effective. The unfortunate reality is that almost 50 years after *Brown*, we still are unable to provide a good education for all students. To further support this, the directors of the 10 federally funded Desegregation Assistance Centers explain how the ideal of a good education held by many minorities has been shattered in what the report described as three failed generations of desegregation efforts since the *Brown* decision (Bates, 1990).

The first generation, the effort to stop and eliminate physical desegregation, has seen some progress in urban and suburban areas. It is possible to see minority and White students attending the same school, which is especially true in magnet schools or in school areas where Whites are too poor to escape from the city. Many urban communities are becoming increasingly predominantly African American, Latino, and Southeast Asian, and they tend to have an economic base at or below the poverty level and an infrastructure that is crumbling.

The second generation, the attempt to eliminate inequities in schools rather than between schools, has also experienced slow progress. In mixed-race schools, minority students are disproportionately placed on lower academic tracks than are White students (Oakes, 1985), they receive more suspensions from schools and are referred to treatment centers (Russo &

Talbert-Johnson, 1997), and they are placed in special (i.e., remedial or compensatory) classrooms (Irvine, 1990). The curriculum is Eurocentric in focus.

The third generation, the achievement of equal learning opportunities and outcomes for all students, is producing varied results. Although minorities are completing high school and going to college, the number of minority students failing or dropping out of school is alarmingly high.

The failure of the past generations' desegregation efforts to create equitable educational opportunities is evident, even though the federal courts currently are relieving most urban schools from court-ordered supervision of all efforts to desegregate these schools (Brown, 1999). *Brown* had a significant influence on education for people of color; however, educational excellence and equity is still elusive for urban schools.

Major work still needs to be done to complete school desegregation. Improvements must be made in the integration of schools with the adoption of culturally relevant pedagogies to reflect the growing ethnic and cultural diversity of students and families in communities served by schools; adjustment of curricula, social climate, practices, and policies; and equitable funding resources for urban schools.

If reform efforts do not examine policies and practices that impede equal access, outcomes, and equity in schools, then schools will continue to serve as a biased system for all learners. Stakeholders must become change agents first as well as agents of change in the quest for innovative agendas in opportunities to learn for all students in America's schools.

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