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The Shame of the Nation

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THE SHAME OF THE NATION



Comments by Sally Hipp

How was your day at school today?" This is a question that many of us ask our children each day. Jonathan Kozol author of *The Shame of The Nation* maintains that the answers to this question will vary greatly depending on your child's race. Kozol writes that schools today are more racially segregated than the schools were in 1954 when *Brown vs. The Board of Education* was passed. In this landmark decision, "separate but equal education" as interpreted by the US Supreme Court in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896 was declared unconstitutional. As a result of this decision, massive busing took place whereby children from all areas were bused to different schools so that the racial mixture more reflected that of society. Busing was difficult and expensive and it took several years for students to feel safe in their new schools. For a short while, students of different colors and different races went to school together; however, segregated schools began to form again as the busing solution was viewed as ineffective.

Whom one goes to school with, matters, says Kozol. If black and Hispanic children only go to school with black and Hispanic children, they will never learn how to access white
Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007

society. *Brown vs. The Board of Education* seeks to ensure that students of color have access to this society through education. Where has the energy of implementing *Brown vs. The Board of Education* gone? I found myself angered again when I read Kozol's book; angry like I was in the 1960s when I decided to work in urban education. It is sad to see that progress toward integration of our schools has actually gone backward in the last several decades.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is our current administration's answer to the existing achievement gap between whites and students of color in schools today; however, it does nothing to address the realities of segregation and its negative effects. Instead, it seems to exacerbate the differences between quality of education received by children of color compared to their peers who attend predominately white schools. As a result of the pressures from NCLB, poorer urban schools have used approaches to learning that take away much of the joy that many of us experienced in our elementary school days. Kozol describes schools he visited where there is no more recess, where children have absolute quiet in the lunchroom — no talking, where the students in these schools march down the hall in a very military like fashion, and where the majority of the school day is

spent preparing to take the state exams.

Kozol observed that programs like "Success for All" are being used throughout many school systems that he visited. In these programs the time spent teaching certain subjects is programmed to the minute and the teacher says only the words in the program manual. Teachers, who have been successful in the past using their creative methods of engaging children in learning, are no longer allowed to use those methods. Art, music and physical education have also become a thing of the past in many of our urban schools. Money for those additions to the basic curriculum has been cut. Is it any wonder that our black and Hispanic youth are dropping out in record numbers?

Kozol notes that students do not receive equal access to quality education in this country. It is important to note that Kozol does not fault the teachers. He calls the teachers and the principals in urban schools some of the "unsung heroes" of our day. They work in crowded classrooms with fewer supplies and little support from the communities. They are often paid less and work harder. They work in older buildings where overcrowding is the norm. Kozol looked at schools in New York City and Los Angeles extensively and found conditions in

BOOK REVIEWS

Compiled by Susan Mendoza-Jones

many of these schools deplorable.

Kozol, a Harvard graduate and Rhodes Scholar, has been working with urban kids for over 40 years. His previous work has been highly acclaimed in the field of education including *Death at an Early Age* and *Savage Inequalities*. In *The Shame of The Nation*, Kozol's conclusions are based on a study conducted in over in 30 school districts located in 11 different states. Kozol offers statistics that underscore what we, who work in the schools, already know—that we as a nation have abandoned Dr. Martin Luther King's dream along with the laws of this land.

Kozol's use of data underscores his points throughout the book. Take for instance the following excerpt:

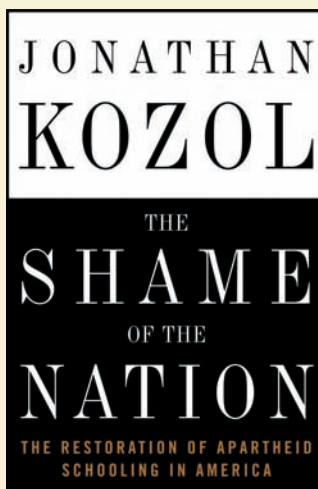
"In 48 percent of high schools in the nations 100 largest districts, which are those in which the highest concentrations of Black and Hispanic students are enrolled, less than half the entering ninth graders graduate in four years. Nationwide from 1993 - 2002, the number of high schools graduating less than half their ninth grade class in four years has increased by 75%...

"Statewide in the 94% of districts in New York where white children make up the majority, nearly 80% of students graduate from high school in four years."

Kozol adds that the reason for these statistics that account for low graduations rates of black and Hispanic children is that students in high schools are the products of apartheid education that results from our return to segregated schools.

Kozol writes with such compassion for the underserved in our educational system. I applaud him for continuing the fight for equality in our schools. Kozol wants us to know what is really going on in urban schools, and perhaps by knowing, to help rectify the situation. Kozol himself offers no solutions to the problem in this book. In one chapter he asks inner city teachers what they think should be done. One teacher said that teachers need to march in the streets to call attention to the problem. Another said we have to "speak the word racism clearly."

Our prisons are filled with people of color — many of whom did not graduate from high school and have trouble with reading and basic mathematics. Money will help, but it is not the total answer. We thought busing would fix the problem. Thanks to Dr. Kozol, we are keenly aware that the problem is not fixed. Perhaps Dr. Kozol sees his mission as one who uncovers and enlightens. It is a call to action, to be sure, but what now? Where do we go from here? Kozol effectively uncovers our shame, challenging us to summon the courage to take action. Using our collective experiences and wisdom, I am hopeful that we can turn our shame into positive outcomes for all students. ☺



The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America

by Jonathan Kozol, from *Publishers Weekly*

Public school resegregation is a "national horror hidden in plain view," writes former educator turned public education activist Kozol (*Savage Inequalities, Amazing Grace*). Kozol visited 60 schools in 11 states over a five-year period and finds, despite the promise of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, many schools serving Black and Hispanic children are spiraling backward to the pre-Brown era. These schools lack the basics: clean classrooms, hallways and restrooms; up-to-date books in good condition; and appropriate laboratory supplies. Teachers and administrators eschew creative coursework for rote learning to meet testing and accountability mandates, thereby "embracing a pedagogy of direct command and absolute control" usually found in "penal

institutions and drug rehabilitation programs." As always, Kozol presents sharp and poignant portraits of the indignities vulnerable individuals endure. "You have all the things and we do not have all the things," one eight-year-old Bronx boy wrote the author. In another revealing exchange, a cynical high school student tells his classmate, a young woman with college ambitions who was forced into hair braiding and sewing classes, "You're ghetto-so you sew." Kozol discovers widespread acceptance for the notion that "schools in ghettoized communities must settle for a different set of academic and career goals" than schools serving middle- and upper-class children. Kozol tempers this gloom with hopeful interactions between energetic teachers and receptive children in schools where all is not lost. But these "treasured places" do not hide the fact, Kozol argues, that school segregation is still the rule for poor minorities, or that Kozol, and the like-minded politicians, educators and advocates he seeks out, believe a new civil rights movement will be necessary to eradicate it.

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Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation

by Jonathan Kozol, from *Library Journal*

Alicea and Kozol paint a vivid portrait of life in one of America's most impoverished neighborhoods, New York City's South Bronx. While telling similar stories, each narrative has its own unique flavor and characteristics that reveal the crushing nature of poverty in America and recount the lives of those who rise above it. Kozol (*Savage Inequalities*, LJ 9/15/91) describes a neighborhood ravaged by drugs, violence, hunger, AIDS, and antipathy, but also one where children defy all the stereotypes. In the South Bronx, where the median income is \$7,600 a year and everything breaks down, Kozol reveals that the one thing that has remained resilient is the children. One of the resident children is 15 year-old Alicea, who saw her mother and sister succumb to AIDS, a father incarcerated in prison, and friends entrapped by drugs or violence. Like that of many children, her story is a life of options or despair. The path they pursue is dependent on government leadership. Both books should be required reading for policymakers and those concerned with the plight of the American poor. Michael A. Lutes, University of Notre Dame Lib., Ind.

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Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America

by Nathan McCall, from *School Library Journal*

An autobiography that captures the pain, anger, and fierce determination of a black journalist writing today for the *Washington Post*. McCall's open and honest description of his life as a boy in a Black neighborhood in Portsmouth, VA, his participation in violent criminal acts, and his eventual imprisonment for armed robbery seem somehow to be an expression of the rage of so many young people in America's urban areas. While imprisoned, he worked as an inmate librarian and was so moved by Richard Wright's books that he became fascinated by the power of words and decided to become a writer. Though he has made a successful career against great odds, he makes it plain that he does not feel completely at ease with his peers in the establishment or those on the streets. His difficult story is told in such an immediate and compelling fashion that young people will be caught up in this strong narrative and gain real insight into