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The Strange History of School Desegregation

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Civil Rights marchers in Florida, March 27, 1964.

By Robert Lowe

Every decade since 1954 it has been obligatory to celebrate *Brown*, and this is particularly so at the half-century mark. Yet over time it has become increasingly difficult to understand what there is to celebrate. Today, given the racial demographics of many cities, little desegregation is possible within urban borders; the courts have steadily been releasing resegregated school districts from judicial oversight; and the promotion of desegregation has been replaced by the pursuit of policy instruments like school choice, neighborhood schools, and small schools—policies that often are indifferent—or even hostile—to desegregation.

While I think the strange career of school desegregation has contributed to cynicism toward desegregation's capacity to create equal educational opportunity, I also think it is important not to lose sight of how big an advance *Brown* was for racial justice at the time of the decision and how it spurred further advances.

Recently, a number of publications have fondly recalled certain features of black life in the South before the era of desegregation—a tendency that Adolph Reed unkindly, though not necessarily inaccurately, has labeled "romancing Jim Crow." Work in this vein partly has focused on African-American schools, the earliest study I know of in this regard being Thomas Sowell's "Patterns of Black Excellence." There is no doubt that there were outstanding black schools, high schools in particular, some probably better than any white schools. The most famous was Dunbar in Washington, D.C., and there was the other Dunbar in Little Rock. There also was Dudley High School in Greensboro, N.C., whose teachers inspired three of the participants in the first Woolworth's sit-in, and obviously there were many more. But I think it is important not to underestimate how dangerous an educated black population was to the white supremacist social order and often how adamant white opposition was to anything but the most rudimentary African-American schools.

Leon Litwack in *Trouble in Mind* reminds us that after the Civil War, "The sight of blacks carrying books often had the same effect on whites as the sight of armed blacks, and many would have found no real distinction between the two threats." Not all that much had changed by the 1930s when the NAACP launched its effort to achieve equal schools. One manifestation of white hostility was the effort to starve black schools of resources. Over the first three decades of the 20th century the funding gap between black and white schools in the South increasingly widened. NAACP studies of unequal expenditures in the mid to late 1920s found that Georgia spent \$4.59 per year on each African-American child as opposed to \$36.29 on each white child. A study by Doxey Wilkerson at the end of the 1930s found that only 19 percent of 14- to 17-year-old African Americans were enrolled in high school. (This was in part because public high schools remained unavailable to African Americans in much of the rural South.) This meant that for African Americans to act on their aspirations for education, as James Anderson, Vanessa Siddle Walker, and others have pointed out, they had to donate their own labor and money—a kind of double taxation to use Anderson's phrase—to create minimally viable schools. Another manifestation of white hostility to black education was the personal costs—job loss, harassment, death threats—that black plaintiffs would pay when they sought equalization of resources or, more boldly, desegregation itself.

The NAACP began its effort to achieve desegregated schools in the early 1930s but initially did so within the "separate but equal" framework of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. It tried to make separate schools more equal in facilities, teachers' salaries, school terms, and transportation as a way of putting financial pressure on the South to dismantle a dual system of education. The NAACP won a number of victories, particularly around salary equalization, but triumphs at the graduate school level from the mid 1930s to 1950—resulting in token desegregation and findings that segregation produced intangible inequalities regardless of resources—inspired the confidence to lead a direct assault on segregation that commenced in 1950. As late as 1954, black schools got only 60 percent of the funding white ones received, but the litigation leading to *Brown* had made a tremendous difference as school systems moved in the direction of equalization. This trend continued after *Brown*, largely in order to reduce black pressure for desegregation. The *Brown* decision at once represented greater parity attained over the previous two decades, and in forbidding legally enforced segregation it also outlawed a major bulwark of white supremacy.

However anemic the language of *Brown* and *Brown II* (the 1955 court-issued implementation order) looks in retrospect—particularly the phrase "all deliberate speed" seemed to justify inaction to remedy segregation—the significance of the decisions wasn't lost on the white South. The decisions immediately spawned the creation of White Citizens Councils—essentially the Klan in business suits—as well as a massive assault on the NAACP membership and strident resistance to desegregation. On the

other hand, the decisions provided federal legitimacy to the fight against discrimination and helped inspire a variegated movement for civil rights of which the demand for school desegregation would be a part—in fact perhaps the most recalcitrant part, as the pace of school desegregation was glacial after *Brown*.

Harvey Kantor and I have argued that educational reform in the 1960s was defined by the tension between African-American demands for equal education and less-than-adequate government responses. From the early to mid 1960s, the African-American demand for desegregation was virtually universal and increasingly vigorous. There were major boycotts, for instance, in New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee. But the federal response to this was to provide compensatory education—as far as I know something nobody asked for. By the time the courts began to vigorously demand desegregation in the South in 1968 and finally in the North in 1973, many African Americans had grown frustrated with its slow pace and they were concerned with unequal treatment in desegregated schools. There were demands for community control and substantial reforms in terms of the staffing and curricula of all-black schools, while the grassroots energy for desegregation declined.

At times desegregation actually disrupted real gains that took place in African-American schools in the North. In the South, there was the loss of more than 30,000 black teachers and in some states as many as 90 percent of black principals, and there was the loss of many high schools and their cultural traditions. Ironically, institutions that helped create the capacity to litigate *Brown* and launch the Civil Rights Movement were, in many cases, destroyed or compromised by desegregation. Then in 1974—well before the anti-desegregation rulings of the 1990s—the Supreme Court began to back away from desegregation by outlawing a plan that included suburban Detroit. Over time, this would mean that the possibilities for significant desegregation would be seriously constrained in a number of cities, while declining tax bases in these cities meant there would not only be many separate schools but unequal ones as well, compared to suburban schools.

At the end of his still-important book *From Brown to Bakke*, J. Harvie Wilkinson maintains that in relationship to school desegregation "white magnanimity [has been] something of a myth." It is hard to refute this. Middle-class whites have avoided desegregation by moving to the suburbs where they have typically opposed increased funding to urban schools; when they have accepted desegregation, it has been on terms favorable to them. So favorable that, in a final irony, whites arguably are the main beneficiaries of desegregated schools today. Although desegregation has expanded opportunities to many African Americans, its 50-year career reminds me that redistributing educational opportunity may be as difficult as redistributing wealth and power.

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