



2007

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Recommended Citation

Kozol, Jonathan (2007) "Turning Our Ideals to Concrete Deeds," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol2/iss1/2>

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PROLOGUE

Turning Our Ideals to Concrete Deeds

Jonathan Kozol

Byfield, Massachusetts

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Among the many burning issues of concern to educators and educational ethicists during the past few years, none appears to provoke more heated controversy than the devastating backswing of our urban public schools to racial segregation at a level of intensity the nation has not seen in decades. The proportion of black children who are educated in a deeply segregated school has now reverted to a higher level than in any year since the death of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968. In New York and California, only one in eight black children is a student in an integrated school. A similarly disturbing trend has been observed in isolation of Hispanic Children.

In Omaha, Nebraska, in the fall of 2005, the superintendent and school board asked the legislature to approve an amalgamation of a number of separate districts, all of which existed side by side within the borders of the city, into a single education district that would bring together black, Hispanic, and white children in a single system. Although there was strong support for this request among enlightened citizens of Omaha, the legislature voted six months later to reject consolidation and went even further by voting to divide the presently constituted Omaha Public Schools, already a small district of some 47,000 children, into three much smaller districts, one of which will serve almost exclusively white children, another Hispanic, and another African-American.

This bitter reversal of the legacy of hard-won victories that led up to the high court's ruling in [Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka \(1954\)](#) is symptomatic of a trend seen nationwide. In Louisville, Kentucky, where the city's schools and those of surrounding suburbs were consolidated decades ago into a single Jefferson County schooling system – a decision that has rendered Kentucky the most integrated state for public education in the nation – a suit filed by separatists in recent years to re-segregate the city's schools will go to the Supreme Court of the United States in the autumn of 2006.

In Seattle, too, the fate of integrated education soon will be decided by the same U.S. Supreme Court that has steadily dismantled the provisions of the [Brown](#) decision since the early 1990's. In the Seattle case, which I have followed closely, a provision known as a "tie-breaker," which permitted a school to consider race in the admission of a student if this would enhance the racial integration of its student population, has been attacked for several years by white parents, many of whom reside in the affluent Queen Anne and Magnolia neighborhoods. The parents in question were distressed to discover that their children could not always be admitted to highly successful Ballard High School, as a consequence of the tie-breaker. When the Seattle school board eloquently defended its position, these parents went to court and temporarily prevailed in undoing many years of racial segregation, not only at Ballard but at several other public schools as well.

The principal of Ballard High, an unusually courageous man named David Engle [who is a contributor to this issue], resigned his position in a speech presented to the student body of the school. "As a privileged leader at the center of the new racial controversy," Engle told his students, "I have decided I could not dodge this decision." In an impressive show of solidarity, the principals of 17 other high schools in Seattle wrote a public letter in support of Engle's action.

The tie-breaker issue has since been debated in the U.S. District Court, which ultimately ruled in favor of Seattle's policy. But the plaintiffs in the case have subsequently appealed this ruling. When their appeal is heard by the Supreme Court in the months to come, probably in the same session in which the Louisville case will be addressed, the prospects for integrated education in this nation may be decided with finality. A march on Washington, in which I've agreed to take a role, is scheduled to take place during the court's deliberations. Whatever the outcome in the court, those who have organized this march intend to force Americans to look with honesty and clarity at the increasingly extreme divide along the lines of race and class between the lives and education of our children.

Those who would like more detailed information on this march may contact me at the newly established teacher network "Education Action!" (Email address: EducationActionInfo@gmail.com.) It is time for educators, civic leaders, and our students to transform their abstract ethics into concrete deeds. Academic hand-wringing will not be enough to turn the tide.

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