

The Brown Irony

Racial progress eventually came to pass—everywhere but in public schools

O liver Brown, on behalf of his daughter, Linda, sued a school board, not a public park commission or state-run railroad, though throughout the South these public facilities were no less segregated than schools. Within the private sector as well, discrimination was pervasive.

Yet today we see marked progress toward racial equality in public facilities, industry, and politics—but not in our schools.

In light of the *Brown* opinion, the irony is all the greater. The opinion accompanying the Supreme Court's decision barred only school segregation—on the shaky grounds that such segregation harmed the “hearts and minds” of black children (see the essays in this issue by Warren Simmons and Howard Fuller, starting on page 21).

Brown nonetheless changed the country's most basic political and economic institutions. Segregated political rallies, legislative assemblies, and presidential cabinets all went by the boards. Not right away, but eventually.

The workplace, too, is now more often racially mixed than not. When the private sector was told not to discriminate, it complied. Not right away—and not completely—of course. But as younger generations scorned racism and money was to be made by becoming an equal-opportunity employer, private institutions opened their doors. Today, black and white adults with similar scores on standardized tests earn similar wages.

Meanwhile, *Brown's* consequences for education remain ambiguous at best. On the plus side, legalized school segregation disappeared and most school districts have become as integrated as their cities' demographics will allow.

But the slow march toward further integration was accompanied by bitter conflicts that introduced new problems—involuntary busing that separated schools from families and communities; large, difficult-to-manage school campuses (built to broaden the social mix of the school); tensions between ethnic groups and within-school discrimination; and lowered expectations for students of all social backgrounds. Whites fled bad schools for racially distinctive suburbs.

Worse, African-American students' learning has continued to trail that of whites. Though the achievement gap narrowed

in the 1980s, it opened again in the 1990s, at a time when the principles of *Brown* should have been firmly entrenched.

Conventional liberals blame “politicians” for inadequate funding or “society” for its abiding, if now hidden, racism. But money has seldom bought progress in education, and it is difficult to claim that racism survives in schools when it is on the wane elsewhere.

Conventional conservatives are more apt to blame the family, suggesting that the child-rearing practices within black households are the root of the problem. Yet this overlooks growing evidence that disparities between the achievement of blacks and that of whites are smallest among preschoolers—the age at which family influences are pervasive and school influence nil (see the article by Roland Fryer and Steven Levitt on page 64).

Closer to the truth are those who blame Hollywood, television, and the fashion industry for fostering the drug-infested, anti-learning, “hip-hop” youth culture that burgeoned in the 1990s.

If street culture is the problem, then assigned neighborhood schools are not the solution. Only in rare instances do traditional neighborhood schools acquire the sense of mission that can wall off the seductions of their immediate environment.

Learning is best fostered when schools draw boundaries that separate classroom studies from the opiates of street life. Because good private schools have discovered this secret, African-American students who attend them are much more likely to complete college than are comparable students from public schools. There are signs that charter schools have discovered this secret as well. As schools of choice, not assignment, they have an institutional incentive to do so.

Unfortunately, some still argue for traditional public schools on the grounds that black families are too ill-informed to make wise choices. But over time, knowledge and commitment will come naturally to most parents, if choice is made available. To ignore this is racist in the extreme. School choice is, indeed, the civil-rights issue of today.

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MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
