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New York Schools: Fifty Years After Brown

by Gail Robinson
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Even parents who can afford private schools send their children to P.S. 6 on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The school offers instruction in political cartooning and foreign language and a joint program with the Museum of Natural History. And all the innovation apparently pays off. More than 92 percent of the students at the school meet the state standards in reading and math for their grade level.

But there is another P.S. 6 in New York City, this one in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Despite a well-regarded principal, only 40 percent of its students meet the state standards in reading and less than a third in math.

The Manhattan P.S. 6 is overwhelmingly white and includes only a smattering of poor students. Its East Flatbush counterpart is more than 92 percent black, with almost 90 percent of its students from families with low enough incomes to qualify the children for a free school lunch.

The differences between these schools reflect the state of education in New York City public schools today, 50 years after the Supreme Court outlawed legally enforced school segregation in the United States. Despite a far greater ethnic diversity, with an increasing number of Asian and Hispanic students, New York City public schools are among the most segregated in the country. But, if integration has not been achieved, few New Yorkers seem to see it anymore as the most important goal in education.

THE BROWN DECISION

On May 17, 1954, when the Supreme Court issued its unanimous ruling in the case of Brown v. the Board of

Education of Topeka, Kansas, legalized segregation in the country had just started to crumble in the wake of World War II. But separate and decidedly unequal still held sway across much of the country, particularly the South, with black Americans forced to sit in the back of the bus, drink at different fountains, and sit in separate train cars. They were barred from Woolworth lunch counters and could not try on clothes in department stores. Poll taxes, tests with arcane questions and intimidation prevented them from voting.

Linda Brown, a black third grader in Topeka, Kansas, had to attend a school a mile from her home, even though a white elementary school was only seven blocks away. The principal of the white school refused to admit Linda, setting in motion the events that would lead to the historic court ruling.

In defense of its dual school systems, the Topeka school board argued that segregated schools prepared youngsters for the segregated society in which they would live and were not harmful to black youngsters.

After years of argument and deliberation, the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, rejected those claims. In the decision, Warren wrote, "Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn."

Brown and a related ruling "reflected and encouraged developments that would soon spark the burst of humane, bold and heroic action that we now know as the civil rights movement," Eric Foner and Randall Kennedy wrote in a special issue of The Nation magazine commemorating the Brown decision.

Some predicted all schools would be integrated within five years. But change came slowly. In 1955, the Supreme Court ruled that desegregation could proceed "with all deliberate speed," a phrase that many school districts took to mean "as slowly as possible." And so a decade after Brown, less than two percent of black youngsters in the South attended integrated schools.

But the civil rights movement helped change that. And by 1974, 20 years after Brown, almost half of all black children throughout the nation went to white-majority schools. Despite what many call the 'resegregation' of the last few decades, some of that change remains, including in Topeka, the city that gave birth to Brown.

But this is not the story in New York City, where the racial composition of schools today almost resembles those in the South of the 1950s.

Indeed, the city's schools were not much more integrated than Southern schools when the Brown decision was issued -- even though Governor Theodore Roosevelt had directed the New York State Legislature to abolish the last two officially black schools in New York City way back in 1900. But as recounted by Diane Ravitch in her book The Great School Wars in 1954, Kenneth Clark, a psychologist whose research bolstered the NAACP arguments in the Brown case, issued another report concluding that New York City had a segregated school system and that black children received an inferior education. The head of the New York City Board of Education then, Arthur Levitt, said the segregation had not "been deliberately imposed by legislation" but was nonetheless "not good educational policy."

At the same time, the population of the school system was undergoing a huge change, as many whites left the city for the suburbs, and more and more Hispanics moved to New York. There were many subsequent efforts to address the segregation in the city -- some sincere, some cosmetic, few successful.

NEW YORK'S SEGREGATED SYSTEM

Today, of the approximately 1.1 million students in New York City public schools, about 13 percent are Asian, 15 percent white, 32 percent black and 40 percent Hispanic. Given the makeup of the student body, one reason for segregation of New York City schools, said Pedro Noguera, a professor at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education, is that "there are no kids to integrate with."

But the population of many schools is even more skewed than the student population as a whole. Some 60 percent of all black students in New York State, including those in New York City, attend schools that are at least 90 percent black, according to a recent study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University; more Latinos in New York State than in any other state go to schools that are 90 percent or more Latino.

Another study, this one by the Lewis Mumford Center at the State University of New York at Albany, found that Asians and Hispanics are more segregated from whites in New York schools than in any other school system in the country. For black-white segregation, New York ranks third.

The Mumford study also found that, in 2000, the typical black student attended a school where only five percent of the other students were white, a sharp drop from 1970.

This segregation has a different cause than that in the South of the 1950s. In New York, "the segregation in the schools reflects segregation in the housing market," said John Logan, who conducted the Mumford center study. While New Yorkers think of this as a progressive city, it is Logan, said, "one of the most segregated cities in the country in terms of blacks and whites."

But the city has had little success implementing policies that might reduce the effects that housing segregation has on schools.

Particularly at the high school level, the city established schools with special programs around the city, in an effort to encourage students to leave their neighborhoods. But the effort has not done much to improve integration. Although some of the individual school programs are good, "I don't believe school choice has made New York a less segregated city," said Jill Chaifetz, executive director of Advocates for Children, which works on school issues.

In another attempt to encourage diversity, the city requires that some high schools with special programs admit the same number of students who do poorly on standardized tests as those who score substantially above average. But this gives the lowest scoring students a better chance at admission because far fewer of that group applies. And some parents, many of them white, complain that their children are being unfairly denied a place in these schools.

Partly in response, white parents in several communities have lobbied to bring back the neighborhood high school, at least in their communities. "Despite paying the highest tax rates in New York City, we don't have a school that will prepare our children to go to the superior colleges they are qualified to attend," a proposal by East Side parents said.

The parents won creation of the new Eleanor Roosevelt High School on East 76th Street, but the school admits children from a broad swath of Manhattan, not just the immediate neighborhood, as the parents had wanted. Eleanor Roosevelt, now in its first year of existence, is 10 percent black, 15 percent Hispanic, 35 percent Asian, and 40 percent white.

Parents in the white, affluent Park Slope section of Brooklyn fought to revamp John Jay, a high school attended largely by black and Hispanic students from outside the community. They believed that three new small schools, with grades 6 through 12, would enable more Park Slope kids to attend high school in their neighborhood. They won their fight but may have achieved a Pyrrhic victory. Top students from Park Slope have been slow to embrace the three new schools and at least one is plagued by discipline problems and a poor reputation in the area.

THE EFFECTS OF SEGREGATION

If the schools are still segregated, does segregation still matter? Some would argue that it does.

Claude Steele, a professor at Stanford University, listed some effects segregation has on black students. "They are more likely to go to poorly funded schools in run-down buildings and more likely to be taught by uncertified and poorly trained teachers," he wrote. "They are likely to be counseled with lower expectations. They are more likely to go to schools with few or no Advanced Placement courses, and they are likely to have less access to test-prep courses and related tutorials."

Although there are exceptions, schools in New York City with higher test scores tend to have greater numbers of white and Asian students, while struggling schools are more likely to be composed primarily of black and Hispanic students.

In the 1990s, the community group ACORN charged that many junior high schools in predominantly black and Hispanic areas did not teach students what they needed to know in order to do well on the test for the selective specialized high schools, such as Stuyvesant. In response, rather than improve the program for all youngsters, the city began offering special instruction for selected students. Despite the classes, less than 10 percent of students at Stuyvesant are black or Hispanic.

Black and Hispanic students score significantly lower than whites and Asians on virtually all standardized tests and are less likely to finish high school. About 94 percent of white youngsters in New York State who started high school in 1999 were seniors in June 2003, but only 61 percent of Hispanic children and 65 percent of black students were.

As New York increasingly relies on standardized tests, some critics worry that black and Hispanic students will be most affected. For example, most students at Taft High School and Bushwick High School, both of which are 98 percent black and Hispanic, did not pass even one of the five Regents tests required for graduation. "On the 50th anniversary of Brown, we've come full circle," said Jane Hirschmann of Timeout From Testing. Relying so much on Regents and other tests, she said, "is very unequal and very unfair."

Test proponents argue, however, that the lack of firm standards in education has been discriminatory, awarding black and Hispanic students diplomas but without giving them the skills they need to earn a living or function in society.

Black and Hispanic students also bear the brunt of discipline in the city schools. More than 90 percent of students at Second Opportunity Schools for students serving lengthy suspensions were black or Hispanic, according to Advocates for Children.

Academics, educators and politicians endlessly debate the reasons for these disparities. But one factor could be that, along with the achievement gap, there is a resource gap. Predominantly black and Hispanic New York City spends $10,500 per pupil, about half the $21,000 that the rich -- and largely white -- Long Island suburb of Manhasset spends, Jonathan Kozol has noted. At the same time, many senior teachers avoid poor, minority schools in the city in favor of richer schools.

The gap to some extent reflects the fact that much of the money for schools comes from local tax revenues, and more affluent -- usually white -- communities have more money to spend than the black and Hispanic communities that tend to be less affluent.

But critics charge that New York State does nothing to erase the gap, and some things that make it worse. According to David Jones, president of the Community Service Society, in New York State "school districts with the highest percentage of minority students receive over $2,000 annually less than school districts with the lowest percentage of minority students." He blames the state's method of allocating funds to districts.

THE BENEFITS OF INTEGRATION

The demand for integration is not purely academic. Students who attended the more integrated schools of the

1970s, and those who attend the segregated schools of today, apparently see the value of diversity.

A recent study by Columbia University Teachers College looked at people who had attended school in the peak integration years of the 1970s before courts began rolling back orders requiring busing and other integration measures. While the integration may not have completely reformed society, it did change individual members of the class of 1980.

The study concluded that the integrated schools did more than any other institution, except perhaps the military, to "bring people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds together and foster equal opportunity." And, the people interviewed said they found attending mixed schools "to be one of the most meaningful experiences of their lives, the best -- and sometimes the only -- opportunity to meet and interact regularly with people of different backgrounds."

Today's school children seem to want a similar chance. Advocates for Children conducted an essay contest to mark the Brown anniversary, asking students to write about such topics as whether integration is important.

In the essays, some of which will be on the group's web site later his month, students wrote about the value of diversity, said Deborah Apsel of the group. "There were kids who said we really wish our school had more Caucasian students or kids from outside our neighborhood," she said. "A lot of kids talked about "tolerance" or "about how integration in the classroom builds on the learning and can add a different dimension to discussions."

LESS AGAINST "SEPARATE", MORE FOR "EQUAL"

But experts debate the value of integration.

Derek Bell, a former civil rights lawyer who teaches at NYU law school, said that in some respects Brown was "a disaster." Those who cheered the decision at the time failed to recognize how entrenched segregation and white racism was in America, he said. Rather than trying to do away with separate schools, Bell has argued, the Supreme Court "might have been better off" if it had set out steps, such as monitoring and enforcement, to ensure that black youngsters attended schools truly equal to those for white students.

Others who support integration, such as Gary Orfield, author of the Harvard Civil Rights Project study, question

whether meaningful segregation can take place without crossing boundaries between city and suburb. But in 1974 -- 20 years after Brown -- the Supreme Court in Milliken v. Bradley ruled that school integration efforts did not have to cross government boundaries -- in that case between predominantly black Detroit and its white suburbs.

Faced with that and other court decisions that have chipped away at efforts to integrate schools, activists in New York have shifted their efforts to trying to get more funding to improve the schools that black and Hispanic youngsters attend.

In one, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity challenged the formula New York State uses to determine how much money the state gives each local school district. Activists in other states have also argued that poorer school districts need more money to help their students meet new state standards.

In the Campaign for Fiscal Equity case, the state's highest court ruled that Albany's funding formula denied students in New York City and other cities in the state their right to a "sound, basic education," and ordered that the situation be corrected. But the issue remains entangled in politics and disputes about the amount of money required. Neither Governor George Pataki nor the legislature -- nor localities -- have come up with a means to fund the court's mandate. The governor suggested using funds from electronic gambling machines.

Elise Boddie of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund said she hates to choose between fighting for integration and struggling for more money. But she admitted that in light of legal rulings and hostile courts, "Funding equity cases may be our only hope."

That funding, said Pedro Noguera, can lead to better schools and maybe even more integrated ones: "If you can get really outstanding teachers into high-need areas and really outstanding programs . . . then you're going to attract middle-class kids of all races," he said. "Quality is what is ultimately going to bring people in, -- whites and Asians as well as middle-class black and Hispanics."

But it will be a long hard road. And many experts, while recognizing the promise of Brown, see few reasons for optimism on its much-observed anniversary.

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