

“Brown v. Board of Education”: The Unfinished Agenda  
by  
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“Brown” is about five related issues:

1. Law, i.e., dejure segregation;
2. A theory of education, i.e. that racially separate schooling s inherently unequal;
3. Equity in educational opportunity;
4. Equity in educational quality; and
5. Adequacy of educational opportunity<sup>1</sup>

Why has progress been so slow in coming? Why is it that 50 years after “Brown,” we have such resistance to providing adequate funding for public schools – as exemplified by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE) lawsuit in New York? I believe the answer can be found in the persistence of defacto segregation in housing; the high correlation between race and wealth; the extraordinarily heavy reliance on local property taxes to fund schools; and our failure as a society to understand and appreciate how intertwined our lives are – even when gates separate our communities. Education is essential to citizenship.

How can anyone disagree with this premise? Yet we know there is disagreement. Last June, New York State’s higher court overturned a lower court’s ruling that defined an adequate education as one achieved by the eighth grade: adequate for voting, jury duty, productive work, and contributing to society through taxes. (Ironically, such an education is not adequate to prepare someone for military service, which the “Brown” decision specifically included as a measure.) CFE argues that adequacy should be defined as the opportunity to attend a school with teachers, materials, facilities, and equipment of appropriate quality to prepare a student to earn a Regent’s diploma. Any education that does less, in terms of opportunity and quality, is inadequate.

Since children do not choose where they live, and since our lives are affected by how we treat even the least of those around us, we need to be mindful of the quality of schooling for all children. After all, more than two-thirds of black and Latino students today attend essentially segregated schools in which most students are also poor.<sup>2</sup> Doesn’t this matter to us?

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<sup>1</sup> Bollinger, Lee. “Educational Equity and Quality: “Brown” and Rodriguez” and Their Aftermath. The “College Board Review, No.201, Winter 2003-04,” pages 25 and 26.

<sup>2</sup> Bollinger, page 26

I have served as “Principal for a Day” in several urban schools, have seen first-hand how inadequate schools can be, and have compared these schools to the ones attended by my children. Imagine a high school with nine doors, seven security guards, and a union contract that requires every door to be guarded and each guard to have relief during the day. Furthermore, imagine that the principal has to use three teacher salary lines to pay for the three security guards needed.

Imagine also that text books are ten to twenty years old; the principal must use her own money to pay for parents’ transportation to attend meetings about their children’s progress; rigid budget guidelines mean that non-salaried money saved in one category cannot be used in others, such as to purchase laboratory materials or supplies; students must pass through three successive metal detectors before going to class; and most students come to school hungry and qualify for a hot lunch.

Who would choose to enroll in such a school? How many would choose to work in such a school? What lessons can be learned from spending even a day in such a school? What happened to the goal expressed by former President Bush that by the year 2000 every child would enter school “ready to learn”?

How can we make sense of arguments about the dollars spent per student, when in one school the dollars must be used for security guards, and in the other money can be used for teachers and aides?

Today’s program to reflect on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “Brown v. Board of Education” reminds us of the purpose of public schooling and the principles of equity, quality, adequacy, - - and reminds us of how far we still have to go. What can we do? I believe we need to act – as individuals in contact with opinion leaders and as people who can vote, write letters to the editor, and attend meetings; as people who can take action in our neighborhoods and communities; as people who can act through organizations – houses of worship, schools, colleges, labor unions, businesses, and philanthropies; and as people who can run for office in order to counter the single-issue advocates who cry, “Not in my backyard.” We need to act one-on-one and through groups, as individuals and as members of organizations.

We need to be mindful of the focused agenda – racism and white privilege – as well as of the broader agenda, immigration and the Dream Act; but we must never forget the focused agenda. This is the unfinished business of “Brown,” the lingering effects of racism on schooling. And we can do something about it – by leaving here with a commitment to action.

Today as in 1954, we can say with clarity,

Education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education in our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him (or her) for later professional training, and in helping him (or her)

to adjust normally to his (or her) environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he (or she) is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity....is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.<sup>3</sup>

This was the Supreme Court's conclusion, as true today as it was yesterday.

This should be our charge, our call to action.

Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> Bollinger, page 25.