

Brown v. Board of Education: The Unfinished Agenda  
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Rotten Opportunities and Rotten Outcomes

Conference Remarks

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Opening

Good morning, welcome and thank you for coming. As Suzy Sonenberg, the director of the Long Island Community Foundation said, I am Elaine Gross, the director of ERASE Racism, which is the organization responsible for organizing this conference. The brief ERASE Racism brochure in your packet tells you that the acronym ERASE stands for **E**ducation, **R**esearch, **A**dvocacy and **S**upport to **E**liminate racism, which gives you a hint about what we do. The brochure lists issue areas that are the focus of our work: education, healthcare, housing and economic development. There is also a list of services that we provide to undo institutional racism and to help other organizations build an anti-racism agenda. In addition to conceptualizing and implementing conferences like this one and providing other types of training and educational forums related to undoing institutional racism, we help groups conduct organizational assessments and assist with program development and strategic planning. We conduct research and facilitate a response to organizational and community concerns about racial issues. We also develop publications related to identifying and addressing institutional racism.

Purpose and Approach of Conference

Let me describe the purpose and approach of this conference. To do that, I call your attention to an example of an ERASE Racism publication that can be found in the right-side of your conference packet. There is a monograph, a collection of articles developed for this conference. I believe if I walk you through this monograph you will begin to understand the purpose and approach of this conference. I begin the monograph with a description of institutional racism to provide a foundation for the exploration of institutional racism in public school education. I differentiate between racial prejudice and racism. Racial prejudice of any sort is a bad thing, and if you are on the receiving end, it can be both unpleasant and even dangerous for you if people act on their prejudice. On the other hand, if you are racially prejudiced and you have the institutional and systemic power to dominate, exclude, discriminate against or abuse groups of people based on a designation of race, then your actions and the policies you create and the way important institutions function, like public schools for example, will have a far-reaching impact on whole groups of people. And over the years the impact is compounded and firmly embedded within institutions. With this institutionalization of racialized disparities most people ignore the inequities or ascribe other explanations for why there are disparities that fall along racial lines. Therefore, you hear a statement like this one: That's a bad school because it's a Black school. There is a companion piece that explains that, even though race is not a scientific term and races do not scientifically exist, this socially constructed concept of race has very real and tangible consequences for us all.

Remembering and understanding our history is crucial to any effort to remedy current problems. I, like so many others recognizing the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, provide a description in the monograph of the legacy of the *Brown* decision. And courtesy of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, I have also included a chronology of important historical moments in the struggle to achieve quality education. There is also an article that looks in more detail at the legacy of public school segregation on Long Island, and I am grateful for some research assistance from the Long Island Studies Institute at Hofstra University.

And finally, I'm reminded of the saying "If you don't know where you are going, then any path will get you there." This conference is designed to help us know where we are going and to thoughtfully figure out how we are going to get there. That's why I included seven briefing papers on each of the topics that will be discussed on Panel II this morning. I am very grateful for the research assistance from a colleague of John Powell's named Gavin Kearney and to John, since Gavin told me that if he wanted to locate the latest research on a given topic, John was a quick resource.

I know it was a bit presumptuous on my part to think that in 36 pages I could do justice to the topics contained in this document. But this monograph is not intended to be a comprehensive compilation of all the research associated with each topic. It is designed to help stimulate and deepen our discussions at this conference and to help focus our work after this conference. I truly hope that a combination of the monograph articles and the presentations by our distinguished panels this morning will bring new insights to the very complex challenge of addressing racial segregation and inequity in our region's schools.

#### Rotten Opportunities and Rotten Outcomes

So, I've done most of my hard work before we arrived at this conference. But I will leave you with a few brief thoughts before we hear from the two panels.

As you know, on Long Island, we have entire school districts with primarily white student bodies and districts that are primarily filled with African American and Hispanic students. Students of Asian descent are more integrated, that is, we don't have districts that are all Asian. What you may not know is that in a 2003 study by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, entitled "A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?", New York State was designated as the most segregated state for Black and Latino students looking at 2000-01 statistics. In "Racism and the Opportunity Divide on Long Island", research commissioned by ERASE Racism and produced by John Powell, it is reported that the three most racially isolated school districts for children of color in New York State, outside of New York City, are all on Long Island: Roosevelt, Hempstead and Wyandanch. Most of the students of color are in 13 of Long Island's 125 school districts. This report also found that 76 districts had 80% or more White students and 44 of those were more than 90% White.

I'm not going to talk about the school report card released by the New York Education Department or about the way public school education is funded or about the government fragmentation which produces way too many school districts that mirror the segregated housing patterns on Long Island. Many of you will remember that a previous conference sponsored by ERASE Racism analyzed these issues in depth. I will just remind you of two facts. First, racial steering by realtors continues on Long Island (many of you may have seen the results of ACORN'S recent report spotlighting these practices) and second, that zoning laws also contribute to residential segregation (which the Long Island Campaign for Affordable Rental Housing is addressing). Our school segregation is complicated by our

residential segregation, but let's not use that as an excuse for "rotten opportunities" and "rotten outcomes."

So I ask you...

Do we Long Islanders have the courage to say no to the perpetuation of institutional racism in our public schools? Institutional racism is producing "rotten opportunities" and "rotten outcomes" for our region's children. When I refer to "rotten opportunities" and "rotten outcomes", in the short term it is more obvious, when you look at the compilation of testing data, for example, that many students of color are shortchanged because of our inaction. When I refer to **our** inaction, I'm including everybody-- political decision-makers, educators, business leaders, parents and all residents of Long Island, leader or not. But we are all diminished, no matter our color, by leaving in place public schools in our region that are racially isolated and inequitable. And the social and economic fabric of our region will not remain healthy if our White students grow up ignorant of this history, ignorant of the ongoing role of institutional racism and unable to cope in an increasingly global economy, given that the majority of the world's population is not white but some shade of brown and black. I believe that this is also a "rotten outcome."

In closing, wishing or pretending that the United States is a "color-blind" society fails to address the real disparities that have resulted from this pseudo-scientific concept of race and the racial hierarchy that accompanies it. These disparities, like the ones we see in public school education on Long Island today, 50 years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, are an outrage. If we are really a people that love justice, then it is our duty to make sure that the institutions of our region break the cycle of injustice reflected in our racially isolated and inequitably resourced public schools that produce "rotten opportunities" and "rotten outcomes" for our region's students.