



# Is the Fight for School Integration Still Worthwhile for African Americans?

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*“Quietly and subtly, the opponents of integration have won. So at least, it seems, judging by virtually every indicator of American public education, from test scores to social outcomes.”—Rucker Johnson, 2019*

In a polarized society like ours, it can be hard to imagine a majority of people agreeing on almost anything, let alone on a major social issue.

But in 1969, Black America was all-in on integration.

At the time, 80 percent of Black Americans surveyed said they wanted their children to attend school with white children. Furthermore, 83 percent preferred to work in mixed settings at their job, 75 percent preferred to live in mixed neighborhoods, and 78 percent believed Black people would be better off through integration rather than community control.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps most strikingly, Black Americans’ reservations about the potential adverse effects of integration were quite muted: only 5 percent of respondents said they thought Black students would do worse if they attended school with white children.

In the decades that followed, a skepticism regarding integration has crept deeper and deeper into the Black consciousness, surfacing in community meetings, school boards, and college classrooms, and forcing African Americans to wrestle with questions fundamental to the American experience—questions about opportunity, access, belonging, and success. Integration went from being a pillar of the civil rights movement to a hotly debated topic, with objections no longer only lodged discreetly in private conversations.

In a recent interview, New York City Chancellor David Banks indicated that addressing school segregation in the nation’s largest school district—in a state that has the most segregated schools in the nation—would not be a priority.<sup>2</sup> He cited his own experience, specifically busing and hostile environments for Black students, as reasons for pursuing other education priorities. “You don’t want to be in a school where people are fighting and they don’t want you to be there, the community doesn’t want you to be there.”

Many African Americans today do not even see segregation as a big deal, despite the fact that schools in many places are more segregated today than they were five decades ago. In

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a 2018 poll by Gallup, 33 percent of Black respondents said segregation was either “not too serious of a problem” or “not a problem at all.”<sup>3</sup>

More than a half century after *Brown v. Board* and 150 years since the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, the question falls to us: Is the fight for school integration still worthwhile for Black people?

The answer to this question is complex, rooted in the social and political forces that have shaped American life in the past century and that shed light on Black trepidation about integration. It is also a critical question for us as a society—and Black folks specifically—to answer, for it implicates the major social and policy decisions we grapple with today and how they impact us, at a time when there is little to speak of in terms of an integration agenda at the federal level. And yet, the shameful chasm of racial segregation in schools continues to widen.

What follows is an attempt to contextualize and make sense of contemporary Black thoughts on integration, and make a case for where we go from here. In particular, many of the current feelings and thoughts about integration, as well as the visions for the future of Black education, had originally emerged as retorts to the shortcomings of the era of desegregation, occurring primarily in the 1970s and the 1980s. In the Black backlash to desegregation, were the right lessons learned?

## Inspired to “Stand a Little Taller”: The Power of an Uplifting All-Black Space

*“I have become curiously convinced that until American Negroes believe in their own power and ability, they are going to be helpless before the white world.”* —Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, 1935<sup>4</sup>

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

With those words, at the altar of a small stone church in the South called Holy Cross, my parents had me baptized in

front of a spirited and supportive congregation in late 1987. Years later, I would receive my first communion there. As a teenager, I would go on to learn many precious lessons in youth group and as an altar boy. I still go back whenever I travel to North Carolina to visit my parents, who remain active parishioners. Holy Cross has been a huge part of my life, not just because of the sheer amount of time I spent there, but because it nurtured me in ways that few other institutions have, molding me into the strong, confident husband, father, and professional that I am today.

Holy Cross is no ordinary Catholic church. What makes it unique is precisely what is responsible for its outsized influence on my life: Holy Cross is the only Black Catholic Church in North Carolina.

The church was founded in 1939 specifically to minister to the Black Catholic community. Its building abutted the historically Black university North Carolina Central for decades, and over the years, its parishioners have represented a diverse group of African Americans in the Durham community, including a high proportion of professional-class families who were affiliated with the university.

Holy Cross is a place of spiritual effervescence, where churchgoers worship with vitality and praise with emotion, and the gospel choir sings with a passion that stirs the soul. The building itself is beautiful, built around stone from the original church, adorned with intricate art, and the unmistakable Kente cloth pattern and omnipresent Black representations of Jesus. There is an energy that is unmistakably different from the traditional Catholic church experience in America.

But perhaps most importantly, Holy Cross is a place where you encounter educational, professional, and moral excellence in a Black setting. Strong Black women and men who inspire the parish’s children to stand up a little taller, work a little harder, and achieve a little more. Black Sunday school teachers who teach indelible life lessons. Young Black professionals who are sharply dressed, hip, and charismatic, and offer the youth someone to emulate. And an older Black generation that tacitly acknowledges through their eyes and

in their stories that they expect the next generation to pursue greater heights than were available to them when they were children.

There is something tremendously powerful about an affirming, uplifting all-Black setting, particularly for young Black people in their formative years. The experience is not limited to church. Brothers and sisters of black fraternities and sororities, as well as alumni from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), all testify to a similarly powerful impact.

This phenomenon is also not limited to African Americans. Local synagogues are central to the cultural identities and social lives of many Jewish Americans, as are mosques to many Muslim Americans and Chinese-language Saturday schools to many Chinese Americans.

There is no doubt that the well-being of people of color and cultural minorities in the United States relies upon affinity spaces that are identity-affirming. In fact, at various historical moments, they have been essential to the survival of oppressed communities. In the nineteenth century, abolitionist societies and the underground railroad provided safe haven to thousands of enslaved Black people escaping the barbarism of chattel slavery. In the twentieth century, Black churches formed the backbone of the Civil Rights Movement, providing the infrastructure for organizing, advocacy, and spreading messages. And while people of color have depended on such institutions, formal and informal alike, since the beginning of this country's history, those in dominant cultural groups have often cast suspicion on such efforts: "What are those folks plotting?"

But the utility of these cultural institutions of uplift and empowerment is not merely relegated to historical concerns—they play a huge role in the lives of racial and cultural minorities today. Moreover, they serve a greater purpose than simple fellowship with those who share a common bond.

The conservative view of America as a "melting pot," where newcomers add some new flavor to the pot, but mainly assimilate to the dominant culture, takes issue with all-Black

spaces. But these critiques are not solely the domain of the right. Last year, Bill Maher, who still identifies as a liberal commentator, accused proponents of Black affinity dorms on college campuses (and the NFL's use of the Black National Anthem) of "promoting segregation."<sup>5</sup> Such assimilationists argue that strong same-race cultural institutions for racial or ethnic minorities do not further the social ties of the diverse peoples of this country, or that they are "divisive" or "radical." But my experience has been the exact opposite—groups like these helped me make sense of my everyday experiences and gave me the tools and relationships to be successful in the greater American society.

Decades of psychological research on racial identity development gives a window into the mechanism by which affinity spaces help children of color succeed in society. Experts describe an initial stage in the racial identity development of children of color in the United States that leads to a subconscious emulation and lionization of the dominant (white) culture. These behaviors are absorbed and adopted simply by living and participating in mainstream U.S. society and are unavoidable for children who interact with media, schooling, and social networks.<sup>6</sup> Unchecked, the impact on people of color can be debilitating. It leads many children to reject their own cultural, racial, or ethnic groups, internalizing racist notions about themselves, and decreasing their self-esteem due to an inability to ever fully meet the dominant "standard."

Nonetheless, in her research on Black youth, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum found that the exposure to positive same-race spaces can help counteract these effects. "The opportunity for same-race peer relationships, the opportunity to gain new information about African-American heritage and accomplishments, the availability of role models, and the encouragement of significant adults," concludes Dr. Tatum in a 2004 study, "were reported as important components in these students' successes and in their resolution of racial identity issues."<sup>7</sup> These spaces help children progress to other, more productive phases of their racial identity development.<sup>8</sup>

Positive, strong, all-Black spaces are key to success for



African Americans, and especially for African American children—a fact that Black Americans have known for a long time. Is this, then, the basis for Black skepticism of integration efforts? Perhaps. But to the extent that such a notion is rooted in the belief, or even the blind hope, that America’s segregated school system delivers on the ideal of the strong Black social idyll, it is a notion unsupported by the facts, and a peek inside the state of today’s schools demonstrates why.

## The State of Segregated Black K–12 Schools

*“If there are not adequate Negro schools in Florida, and there is some residual, some inherent and unchangeable quality in white schools, impossible to duplicate anywhere else, then I am the first to insist that Negro children of Florida be allowed to share this boon. But if there are adequate Negro schools and prepared instructors and instructions, then there is nothing different except the presence of white people.”*

—Zora Neale Hurston, 1955<sup>9</sup>

*“We are not going to comply with the Supreme Court decision of putting whites and Blacks together, but the least we advertise that fact, the better.”*

—John C. Stennis, U.S. senator from Mississippi, 1954<sup>10</sup>

The Ronald Brown Academy is a K–8 public school in the Morningside neighborhood of Detroit’s east side. In the 2017–18 school year, the school served 878 students.<sup>11</sup> When the previous year’s test results came out, they demonstrated that 2.6 percent of all sixth graders were proficient in Math and 3.8 percent were proficient in English. Three quarters of the school’s population had been chronically absent that year. That was also the year the district found that Ronald Brown had the highest lead levels of any school in the entire district,<sup>12</sup> discovering 1,500 parts per billion in the drinking water, approximately 100 times the allowable limit. The following year, the school would fail to retain one-third of its teachers.

It is probably unsurprising to most observers that the Ronald Brown Academy is 99 percent Black. Would such conditions and outcomes be permitted to persist, year after year, in an

all-white school in Michigan?

Likely not. But the status quo did not arrive by happenstance. The census tract around Morningside has a poverty rate of 48 percent, the median household income is \$24,000 per year, and 84 percent of the school’s students are economically disadvantaged.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, historically, the Detroit Public Schools Community School District has been dramatically underfunded, especially since mandated desegregation resulted in white flight from the district to surrounding suburbs. For example, according to *Chalkbeat*, “the Detroit district receives \$8,142 per student per year from its state foundation grant, while Bloomfield Hills, a wealthy suburb of Detroit, receives \$12,354, even though Detroit enrolls a higher proportion of students who need extra support.”<sup>14</sup>

Things have gotten so bad in Detroit that two years ago, the state of Michigan settled a lawsuit brought six years prior<sup>15</sup> by seven Detroit students who sued the state arguing that it was not meeting its constitutional obligation that every child have a right to literacy under the Fourteenth Amendment. They claimed that the lack of resources, curriculum, and skilled teachers in their Detroit classrooms robbed them of their constitutional rights.

Segregated schools do not exist in a vacuum. Poverty, underfunding, white flight, lack of opportunity—these are the conditions that conspire to make segregation so pernicious. The Ronald Brown Academy’s woes are emblematic of the nation’s segregated public K–12 schools more broadly. Some advocates attempt to lump these segregated public K–12 schools together into the same category as institutions like the nation’s HBCUs and preeminent black social organizations (which I deliberately do not refer to as segregated spaces), arguing that they possess—or in the future will possess—the capacity to raise a generation of self-affirmed, empowered, and successful students in their separate spaces, and thus the contemporary battle to integrate schools, especially for Black students, should be abandoned.

Yet for most Black segregated K–12 public schools in America, having an all-Black clientele is where the similarity with these other institutions of uplift and empowerment

ends. It is unfortunately too rare, in 2022, for all-Black K–12 public schools to be bastions of uplift and opportunity that feature a strong corps of Black teachers and leaders that instills confidence and excellence in its students. It is not a comfortable statement to make, but it is, to use DuBois’s words, “simply calling a spade a spade.” Nor is it, as we will see, an indictment of Black people. The difference comes down primarily to agency, poverty, outcomes, and resources.

One key feature distinguishing many of the institutions that support Black excellence in academic, social, and other endeavors from segregated spaces is the element of agency. People have the *choice* to become a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, or not; the *choice* to attend Spelman University, or not; the choice to attend Holy Cross Church, or not. To the contrary, for millions of Black families who reside in segregated neighborhoods or attend segregated schools, there are myriad structural forces at play that conspire to limit their choices to just one—effectively eliminating any element of agency whatsoever. Some of these forces are clear and visible, such as deliberately drawn school zone boundaries within or between districts, whereas some are less visible and operate in the background, such as discrimination in real estate practices.

But perhaps the most consequential feature of Black segregated schools in the United States is that they are mostly high-poverty schools. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), a staggering 72.4 percent of Black eighth graders attend a high-poverty school, compared with only 31.3 percent of white students, subjecting a mind-boggling number of Black students to the well-known adverse effects of concentrated poverty.<sup>16</sup> Concentrations of poverty are associated with higher levels of endemic violence, higher levels of stress, less exposure to the cultural capital needed for upward mobility, and many other disadvantages.<sup>17</sup> According to EPI, there is approximately a twenty-point performance gap on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) between Black students who attend schools that are high poverty and mostly students of color, and Black students who attend schools that are low-poverty and mostly white.<sup>18</sup> The entire white–Black gap on this very test is thirty-two points.<sup>19</sup>

In the U.S. school system, being Black means you are more likely to attend a high-poverty school than a low-poverty school—even if you are not poor. There is a clear throughline to racial segregation in housing. As the Brookings Institution reports, “Affluent black families, with annual incomes of more than \$100,000, are four times more likely to live in poor neighborhoods than comparable white families—and only half as likely to live in affluent areas.”<sup>20</sup> Where families can afford to live typically determines where they can send their children to school, but because even high-income Black families are more likely to live in low-income neighborhoods—for a variety of reasons, some personal, but many structural—they are therefore also more likely to send their children to high-poverty schools.

And the number of high-poverty schools is increasing. Rapidly. Schools where 76 percent or more of the student body qualified for free and reduced lunch comprised just 11 percent of U.S. public schools in 1996; by 2013, that had more than doubled, with almost one quarter of all schools falling into this category.<sup>21</sup>

Recent data from researcher Sean Reardon and his Stanford University colleagues corroborate the strong correlation between racial segregation and academic achievement gaps, and they explain that the link between these operates “entirely through differences in exposure to poor schoolmates.”<sup>22</sup> They go on to state that, “high-poverty schools provide, on average, lower educational opportunity than low-poverty schools. Racial segregation matters, therefore, because it concentrates black and Hispanic students in high-poverty schools.”

Funneling Black children to high-poverty schools is not the only way segregation works to harm Black education. There is a vast resource gap that exists between schools and districts that serve white children as compared to schools and districts that serve Black children. In 2019, EdBuild found that nonwhite school districts were underfunded relative to white school districts by \$39 billion in a bombshell report.<sup>23</sup>

As public institutions that rely on public resources, Black schools and districts are subject to the same discrimination,

underfunding, and disfavorable treatment as any other public systems that predominantly serve African Americans in this country have always been. Professor Rucker Johnson of the University of California, Berkeley, showed that the enactment of desegregation orders in the 1960s and 1970s led to an immediate average increase in per-pupil education spending dollars of 22.5 percent for Black children.<sup>24</sup> In effect, once Black children were no longer entirely concentrated in certain schools, it became much more difficult to systematically deny them resources.

In the modern context, the local nature of school funding helps explain how this happens. Districts where predominantly nonwhite Americans live are places that have been historically redlined by the federal government starting in 1934, denying homeowners in Black neighborhoods access to federally insured mortgages, and those areas have been systemically undervalued and underinvested in at the state and federal levels ever since. Consequently, these neighborhoods take in lower property tax revenues for their school systems than surrounding whiter neighborhoods. As EdBuild points out, “Because our solution to funding inequities is to depend on states to fix the problem, the wealth divide makes school districts in nonwhite areas far more reliant on the state to establish adequate funding than those that serve a mostly white student population.”

Relying on state governments to make Black Americans whole has never been a winning formula. Whether in the Civil War, during Reconstruction, for civil rights, or for voting rights, African Americans have almost always had to rely on the federal government to guarantee a minimum foundation of rights and to level the playing field. In education, the federal government attempts to use Title I spending to compensate for uneven, and, at times, inequitable state funding to provide districts that serve more impoverished students with a greater share of resources; however, as the EdBuild report and an analysis by The Century Foundation demonstrate, it is nowhere near enough to fill the gap.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in providing funding that essentially allows this unfair system to persist, Title I serves to reinforce concentrations of poverty. What if, instead, federal funding incentivized eliminating them?

A groundbreaking study by Heather Schwartz took advantage of a natural experiment set up by random lottery assignments for public housing recipients in Montgomery County, where one set of families were assigned to a high-poverty school, with compensatory funding of \$2,000 per pupil above the district average.<sup>26</sup> Another set of families were assigned to a low-poverty school, with no additional funding. The students who attended the low-poverty schools far outperformed their peers in the high-poverty school, demonstrating how much more impactful integration was for them than funneling additional resources to their peers in high-poverty schools.

Simply put, an array of powerful, deep-rooted structures utilize school segregation to disinvest in Black communities, amplify racial wealth gaps, close down educational opportunities, and undermine Black excellence. And these structures have knock-on effects, such as in the makeup of the teaching corps.

Authentic bastions of Black excellence require leadership and role models who are experienced, expert, and representative of the communities they serve. This is rare for segregated Black K–12 schools in 2022, in large part because of the structural forces and disinvestment highlighted above. Segregated Black schools have been found to have a less experienced teaching corps, on average, than their segregated white counterparts. Plainly put, for a variety of reasons, there simply aren’t enough Black teachers—particularly ones with long experience—to go around, even in Black neighborhoods.<sup>27</sup> A study of changes in Charlotte-Mecklenburg following the end of mandated busing found that “Schools that experienced an increase in the black enrollment share saw a decrease in the proportion of experienced teachers, a decrease in the proportion of teachers with high scores on their licensure exams, and a decrease in teacher value added.”<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the vast majority of all-Black K–12 schools today do not have all-Black teaching force. Most don’t even come close. An analysis by the Washington Post not only showed that just 7 percent of black students nationally attend schools in districts where “the share of black teachers matches or

exceeds that for students,” but also that very few highly segregated Black school districts have an all-Black teaching force—most had gaps of between 20 and 60 percent in terms of Black student–Black teacher composition.<sup>29</sup>

All-Black Ronald Brown had fifty-four teachers on staff during the 2017–18 school year.<sup>30</sup> Approximately one-third of those teachers had two years or fewer of teaching experience, and one-third were white. The inexperienced white teacher assigned to teach in the all-Black school has become so common over the past few decades that it is a Hollywood trope.

Zora Neale Hurston, a literary genius of the early twentieth century who had out-of-the-Black-mainstream political beliefs and whose quote opened this section, argued vociferously against integration in a 1955 op-ed in the *Orlando Sentinel*, believing that the desire for integration stemmed from a romanticizing of proximity to white people rather than genuine improvement. Remarking on the state of affairs of (segregated) Black education in her state of Florida she wrote, “Negro schools in the state are in very good shape and on the improve. We are fortunate in having Dr. D. E. Williams as head and driving force of Negro instruction. Dr. Williams is relentless in his drive to improve both physical equipment and teacher-quality.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet unfortunately in 2022, in Florida and indeed nationwide, segregated K–12 Black schools are not “in very good shape” or “on the improve” and there is no Dr. Williams. Simply put, our nation’s segregated Black K–12 schools are not the bastions of Black excellence that we wish they were.

## The Exceptions to the Rule

*“The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass [sic]...”*  
—W.E.B. DuBois, 1903<sup>32</sup>

*“A child cannot be taught by anyone whose demand, essentially, is that the child repudiate his experience, and all that gives him sustenance, and enter a limbo in which he will no longer be*

*black, and in which he knows that he can never become white. Black people have lost too many black children that way.”* — James Baldwin, 1979<sup>33</sup>

“It is great to be here,” said President Barack Obama in a 2011 school visit, “at Benjamin Banneker High School, one of the best high schools not only in Washington, D.C., but one of the best high schools in the country.”<sup>34</sup>

And it was not hyperbole. Over the years, Banneker has been recognized as a National Blue Ribbon School, one of America’s Best Public Schools by *U.S. News & World Report*, and the top high school in Washington, D.C. A Washington Post profile from the nineties called Banneker “a school of miracles” touting the accomplishments of its graduates, which included acceptances to Harvard and Yale.<sup>35</sup> Under long-standing Principal Anita Berger, Banneker has had a years-long streak of a 100 percent graduation rate and 100 percent college acceptance rate.

By any standard, Banneker is exceptional. Banneker is also mostly Black. Last year, only 2 percent of Banneker’s students identified as white.

Banneker combines its outstanding academic record with palpably high standards in everything it does. Students are expected to give back to their community—270 community service hours are required for graduation. Moreover, the school’s close proximity to Howard University means there is no shortage of role models nor exposure to academic excellence.

On a visit to the school, Principal Berger told me “we don’t have any discipline issues here.” And a walkthrough of the building proved she was right. In every classroom, students were perked up and attentive, participating in high-level discussions in advanced classes.

There is no question that Banneker has amazing outcomes for children, due in no small part to outstanding leadership (Ms. Berger is a Black woman with stellar credentials and inspirational leadership who has been the principal for sixteen years), the hard work of the faculty, staff, and students, and



the community support that beacons like Banneker often receive.

There is also something else that makes Banneker different—and this is not to diminish any of its many accomplishments—but is important to understand: Banneker is a selective public school, meaning in order to attend, students must submit an application that is accepted by the school's selection committee and present for an interview. "Final determination of accepted applicants will be made after a personal interview," the school's website informs would-be applicants.<sup>36</sup>

Banneker hand picks its students, which ensures that the prospects it selects meet certain minimum criteria and are likely to uphold the institution's stellar reputation. It also means that its student body looks significantly different from other Black schools in the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) system. Last year, just 19 percent of Banneker's student body was economically disadvantaged. The average for DCPS schools in the same year was 73 percent, and it would be significantly higher if you only included the predominantly Black schools. Banneker has long had a reputation of educating D.C.'s elite Black families.

This is *not* to say places like Banneker should not exist for Black students. There certainly are many more selective and exclusive white public schools than selective and exclusive Black public schools across D.C. and the United States as a whole, so it would be unfair to single Banneker out for criticism. It is simply to say that selectivity is not a strategy for addressing the deep structural inequities affecting the majority of U.S. students.

There is also a smattering of K–12 schools across the United States that see themselves as both academically stellar and in service of mostly Black and mostly low-income students, unlike places like Banneker in D.C. or Medger Evers in New York City. There are the rare private schools that operate from endowments or philanthropy, like Piney Woods Country Life School; and the rest are mostly charter schools, many of which have gained acclaim in the past two decades for their outstanding results.

The most recognizable charter schools are part of Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) such as KIPP, Uncommon, and Success Academies. And to their credit, many of these organizations' students achieve outstanding test scores. Critics argue, however, that despite serving primarily low-income students of color (with a few exceptions here and there at Success and KIPP), these schools are also selective because of their stringent criteria for student behavior and family expectations, among other factors. So while their student body might be mostly low-income, there is a selection bias at play that distinguishes these students and families from their peers in other ways, such as parent involvement or parent time.

Again, it is not to say these schools should not exist—hundreds of thousands of Black families who sign up to be a part of them or their waiting lists validate that they should.

But these schools have a different set of issues they must confront. In their quest to achieve stellar academic results, they have often embraced practices that are questionable, and many of these schools have faced a reckoning of their own in the past two years. Not to mention that many of these questionable practices have been propagated by non-Black leaders, since the teacher and leader corps at many of these schools skews young and white.

So while Success Academies boasted a truly stellar 99 percent pass rate in Math (compared to 47 percent for the state of New York on average) and a 90 percent pass rate in English Language Arts (compared to 45 percent pass rate for the state of New York on average), in 2019, they also suffered massive blowback from alumni and former teachers during the past two years of America's racial reckoning. Instagram posts under the banner "Survivors of Success Academy"—an account with almost 6,000 followers—describe controversial, illegal, and racist incidents (these have not been independently verified) at the schools. The schools also received a lot of blowback for their lightning rod of a leader Eva Moskowitz's slow and inartful response to the murder of George Floyd.<sup>37</sup>

Large CMOs like these have often defended their strategic

choices to focus on serving low-income students of color by arguing that serving middle- or upper-income families would dilute their impact or take seats away from students who need it the most. Some simply believe that their “brand” is unappealing to white and middle- or upper-class families. Not only does this singular focus on a particular demographic perpetuate segregation, but it also creates a schism between those that attend the school and those that run the school, in that the children of teachers and leaders of a school are not likely to be represented in the school’s student population. And this dynamic is worrying, because teachers and leaders make decisions, large and small, about how the school is run that directly impact its students. Whether consciously or subconsciously, some of these decisions are different than they would be if they were decisions made about their own children. Leaders who institute “no excuses” disciplinary regimes in their schools, for instance, often choose to send their children to schools that wouldn’t dream of such practices. This phenomenon has landed many of these types of schools in hot water recently. This alone is enough to question whether outstanding test scores are worth it—particularly when it appears that some of the controversial methods used to achieve them would never be attempted with white or middle-class students.

Even the “exceptions”—the places that on their surface seem to offer the answers to excellence in Black education—present issues that prevent them from being the panacea to the ills facing K–12 Black education *broadly* in the United States, even if many of these places do great things for children and ought to exist. And while there are many ideas worthy of notice, and individual schools worthy of acclaim, it is critical to remember, from a quantitative analysis of the federal education legislation No Child Left Behind by Douglas N. Harris, now professor of economics at Tulane University, that “low-poverty schools are 22 times as likely to be high performing” as high-poverty schools.<sup>38</sup> Many of these school models—charter schools or selective Black public schools—emerged in the last four decades as a retort to the failings of desegregation in the decades prior. But perhaps instead of rejecting desegregation wholesale, there was something more to be learned from that era.

## Desegregation Worked...and Didn’t

*“Desegregation is eliminative and negative, for it simply removes [these] legal and social prohibitions. Integration is creative, and is therefore more profound and far-reaching than desegregation. . . . Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. . . . Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community.”* —Martin Luther King, Jr., 1962<sup>39</sup>

In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board*, most school districts across the country failed to make any meaningful changes to integrate. Districts in the North, despite being extremely segregated, claimed the ruling did not apply to them and that whatever segregation existed was “de facto” segregation, rather than segregation enshrined in law. Many school districts in the South actively resisted change or took many years to make substantive changes. It was court ordered desegregation, which was mostly targeted at Southern districts, that led to real change, but not until the late 1960s and the 1970s.

The 1980s were the high-water mark for desegregation in the South. This coincided with the narrowest achievement gap between Black and white students in the history of the NAEP, the only national, longitudinal assessment. In 1988, 43.5 percent of all Black students in the South were in desegregated schools.<sup>40</sup> That number has declined ever since and is currently below levels from the late 1960s, when court-mandated desegregation began in earnest.

The period of court-mandated desegregation is instructive for understanding the impacts of desegregation on students and the roots of the opposition to modern integration.

The positive impacts on Black children attending desegregation schools during this era were dramatic. By comparing outcomes between similar cohorts of children (such as children one year apart in school, or siblings) who happened to have either experienced desegregated schooling or not, based on the year a given desegregation order went into effect, Rucker Johnson was able to isolate the impact of attending a desegregated school along a host of outcomes. Johnson found that attending a desegregated

school correlated to a higher educational attainment, greater likelihood of graduating high school, lesser likelihood of ever being incarcerated, higher adult wages, lower incidence of poverty in adulthood, and better health outcomes. And these impacts were greater the more years that a child experienced desegregated schooling.

“Contrary to popular wisdom, integration has benefited—and continues to benefit—African Americans, whether that benefit is translated into educational attainment, earnings, social stability, or incarceration rates,” writes Johnson in his book, *Children of the Dream*.<sup>41</sup>

There had been high hopes for integration in the Black community. Outcomes like those shown by Dr. Johnson seemed to confirm exactly how ending segregation could benefit Black children. But some, like the ever-prescient Dr. King Jr., knew that simply mandating desegregation was not going far enough, and he differentiated between desegregation, which is simply removing barriers to children learning together, and integration, which necessitates a much more holistic and co-equal arrangement that did not happen in the desegregated South.

It is these other, critical elements of integration that were not prioritized in the 1960s and 1970s—which soured many Black folks on integration. First, it has been well-documented that many African American teachers and principals were fired as districts desegregated, especially in the South. When schools were closed as part of the desegregation effort, it was almost always Black schools that were closed. Additionally, continuing discrimination and the backlash to mandated desegregation exacerbated the problem for Black teachers.<sup>42</sup> Two researchers calculated that 31,584 teaching positions occupied by Black teachers were lost between 1954 and 1972 due to desegregation, denying countless children critical role models and mentors.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, many Black students were “integrated” into openly hostile environments, in the South and elsewhere. One need only recall the Little Rock Nine, who had to be escorted past hostile white onlookers, students, and families by the National Guard to attend Little Rock Central

High School, or the Boston riots in response to the court-mandated busing plans. This is not to mention the treatment that Black students were subjected to once they actually got *inside* their new schools.

Many students were ostracized or ignored. On the whole, Black students were, at best, exposed to a curriculum that omitted them and the contributions of their forebears from the curriculum, and at worst, forced to “learn” explicitly racist lessons about Black people and Black history. The mistreatment and misguided teaching of Black students by White teachers fulfilled W.E.B. DuBois’ greatest preoccupations about integration, which he lodged three decades prior to the start of actual desegregation in the South. “The proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil; knowledge on the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group.”<sup>44</sup> Plainly put, DuBois did not believe that this was the fate that awaited Black children in white teachers’ classrooms at the time.

What is most astonishing about the era of desegregation is that the outcomes for Black children were so markedly improved despite all of the obstacles many children endured. It leads one to imagine how large the effects could have been had districts gotten the issues of representation, inclusiveness, and curriculum right. What if you had desegregation, but also Black teachers, inclusive classrooms, and culturally responsive curriculum?

## Where Do We Go from Here?

*“The price that America must pay for the continued oppression of the Negro is the price of its own destruction. The hour is late; the clock of destiny is ticking out; we must act now before it is too late.”* —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1962<sup>45</sup>

Segregation has never served Black people, and it never will. Segregation is, in fact, a tool of white supremacy.

And even though segregation is a dead end, desegregation’s benefits have come with tremendous baggage. The baggage

has been so heavy that it has caused a generation of Black folks to question its worthiness.

So, where do we go from here?

Those who have desegregation's failures top of mind argue for a neo-Plessyist<sup>46</sup> future: separate but equal. Their quest will be to fight the fight on behalf of segregated schools in segregated neighborhoods—an undoubtedly noble and important fight, and make the case that generations of Black advocates have unsuccessfully attempted to make to the rest of society on behalf of these schools and neighborhoods: “give us our equal share of resources, and let us do the rest.” In this vision, equality would take the stigma and the sting out of segregation. But this position is too fantastical. Why, all of a sudden, would government investment be doled out so differently? So differently, nonetheless, that hundreds of years of disinvestment could be overcome?

A separate-but-equal strategy also imperils hopes for a vibrant and pluralistic future democracy, at a time when our current political arrangement is showing significant cracks in its foundation. And for Black students in particular, the opportunity to be exposed to and to expose other students to various elements of the multicultural fabric of American society in the twenty-first century is a prerequisite for an equal seat at the future table of democracy, and success in an ever-changing and more connected world.

On the other hand, those who see the ills of segregation clearly, but are too quick to accept desegregation in whatever form it manifests, misguidedly fight for desegregation at all costs. They may be willing to accept desegregation even in cases where it places undue burden on Black children in the form of unsatisfactory social conditions, harmful pedagogical practices, or unacceptable commutes. They advocate for desegregation because the research touts its benefits, but at what cost?

This approach also does democracy no favors, for it risks producing a generation of bitter students who might finish school skeptical about the worth or the possibility of a multicultural democracy that values and respects all of its

constituent parts. And it risks harming the future success of Black students in the way that DuBois feared almost a century ago.

We must then create space in our social discourse for a vision of the future that both promotes integrated schools for Black students and empowers Black students to lean on the scaffolds of uplifting and powerful all-Black spaces, be they outside-of-school institutions, or within-school structures. Just as we see no contradiction in students of different religions worshiping in a mosque, church, and synagogue on the weekend and then returning to learn in the same classroom on Monday, all renewed, affirmed, and better equipped to participate in its messy affairs, there is no conflict here.

There must also be hope that we can create schools that live up to the democratic imperative of education in a multicultural society: places where all students are held to the highest standards, where their educators are imbued with the belief that any child can and should be successful, and all children are part of a culture where people respect, affirm, and learn from and about each other, especially across lines of difference.

In other words, we must do what the era of desegregation did not: attend to the social, curricular, and logistical concerns of Black students and families by placing them on equal footing as their white counterparts, in addition to changing the structural disadvantages faced by low-income Black children by breaking down the barriers that serve to rob them of their fair share of resources and educational opportunity.

In this future, what is good for young Black children, is also good for our democratic experiment.

## Authors

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A 1969 Gallup poll of 977 Black adults conducted for newsweek is considered the earliest reliable poll for understanding black opinion in the United States because of small sample sizes, bias, and a paucity of data on black opinions in earlier eras. See "Gallup/Newsweek Poll: Negro Survey," conducted May 1, 1969–May 31, 1969, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/study/31089332>, and "Researching Black American Public Opinion," The Roper Center, Cornell University, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/researching-black-american-public-opinion>.
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- <sup>7</sup> Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Family Life and School Experience: Factors in the Racial Identity Development of Black Youth in White Communities," *Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 60, No. 1 (2004): 117-135, <https://spssi.onlinelibrarywiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.0022-4537.2004.00102.x>.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. Dr. Tatum's research also showed that the absence of these spaces and the conditions engendered when too little attention is paid to crucial elements of identity development in predominantly white settings lead to adverse effects: "the perception that teachers did not expect excellence from their Black students (in fact, were surprised by it), the invisibility of African Americans in their curricula in their high schools, and the stereotypical expectations of both Black and White peers hindered the development of a positive Black identity."
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- <sup>11</sup> Ronald Brown Academy School Profile, 2017–18, Detroit Public Schools Community School District, <https://dpscd.detroitk12.org/schools/reports/profiles/333.pdf>.
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