

Inequities Between Suburban and Urban Schools

ARTHUR ADKINS *

SUBURBS are not all alike; they have been classified into such types as residential and industrial.¹ At the risk of stereotyping them, I am discussing here only the suburban areas which are predominantly residential. Although there is a trend toward establishing commercial and industrial plants in suburban areas, we usually think of the suburbs as relatively homogeneous "bedroom" communities most of whose breadwinners earn their living outside the community.

Who are cheated? It is becoming recognized that the inequities between urban and suburban schools are not altogether one-sided. Even though some of these schools show earnest attempts at heterogeneity, particularly in "planned communities," many are composed of families of similar economic levels and social customs. Such situations give rise to the expression, "The Short-Changed Children of Suburbia," which Alice Miel chose as the title of her study of "what schools don't teach about human differences."² She found that the insularity of the community and the consequent composition of the student body and of the teachers in suburban schools resulted in little provision in curriculum or teaching for learning about people of other economic levels or social patterns.

Further, a report on Title III projects of the Elementary and Secondary Education

¹ Raymond W. Mack. "Suburb, Central City, and Education." NSSE Sixty-Seventh Yearbook, Part I. *Metropolitanism, Its Challenge to Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. pp. 82-84.

² Alice Miel. *The Short-Changed Children of Suburbia*. The American Jewish Committee. New York: Institute of Human Relations Press, 1967.

Act, indicating that white pupils were generally more segregated than Negro pupils,³ supplies further evidence on this provincialism of suburban schools which tend to be composed predominantly of white pupils. With more and more cities becoming more and more black in their population, it is possible to picture the suburbs as a "white belt" around a black city.

Where You Live Makes a Difference

Most differences between suburban and urban communities are obviously in favor of suburban schools. They typically have "better qualified" teachers, newer buildings, and "higher" educational standards.⁴ While this generalization, like any other, has many exceptions, Roscoe C. Martin found that the suburbanites in his study considered their schools and their government better than those in the inner city and their politics "cleaner."⁵ While the educational needs in the city schools are greater, partly because the city must furnish more government services of a noneducational kind than typical

³ Thomas F. Pettigrew. "Urban and Metropolitan Considerations: With Special Focus on Civil Rights." *Notes and Working Papers on Administration of Programs, Title III, ESEA*. Washington, D.C.: for the Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, U.S. Senate, 1967. p. 153.

⁴ Mack, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

⁵ Roscoe C. Martin. *Government and the Suburban School*. The Economics and Politics of Education Series, Number 2. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1962. pp. 84 ff.

* Arthur Adkins, Associate Professor of Education, University of Maryland, College Park

suburban communities do,⁶ suburban schools ordinarily benefit more from state aid than do urban schools. They typically have both a higher enrollment ratio and a greater average grant per pupil.⁷ Suburban communities, with greater per capita financial resources at their disposal, devote considerably more of their financial resources to education than do urban communities.^{8,9}

The comparative recency of these phenomena and the growing urgency of the problems they raise are attested to by the differing rates of population increase in suburban and urban areas. In the period from 1950 to 1960, when the urban population increased by 10.7 percent, the metropolitan population outside the central city increased by 48.6 percent.⁹ It may be true, as Havighurst has predicted, that the economic and racial polarization between the suburb and central city may have reached its maximum and that from now on they may become more like one another. As he mentions, they are already one community to newspapers and television stations, but "cooperation between suburbs and the central city will come slowly and with more difficulty in the areas of government and education."¹⁰ In any event the inequities cited here do exist and are likely to be with us for some time to come.

Some of the current measures which are ostensibly intended to bring about greater equality of educational opportunities may in fact perpetuate some of these inequalities. As a Senate Committee report says:

⁶ Seymour Sacks. "Central City and Suburban Education: Fiscal Resources and Fiscal Realities." NSSE Sixty-Seventh Yearbook, Part I. *Metropolitanism, Its Challenge to Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. p. 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁸ Committee on Educational Finance. "Financial Status of the Public Schools." Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1968. Table 29, p. 59.

⁹ Alan K. Campbell and Phillip Meranto. "The Metropolitan Education Dilemma: Matching Resources to Needs." (From: U.S. Census, 1960.) *Educating an Urban Population*. Beverley Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1967. p. 18.

¹⁰ Robert J. Havighurst. "Introduction." NSSE Sixty-Seventh Yearbook, Part I. *Metropolitanism, Its Challenge to Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. pp. 8-9.

... racial discrimination would be easily possible. . . . This feature operates in two ways. First, the 1965 ESEA is designed like the annual rivers and harbors bill; that is, its funding is distributed throughout the nation's 27,000 school districts in virtually an everyone-gets-his-cut, pork-barrel manner.¹¹

The report asserts that the established pattern of funding individual school districts is anti-metropolitan in its consequences since cooperation over a larger metropolitan area is not required to receive this federal support. The report also points out that over half of metropolitan whites live in suburbs, while over 80 percent of metropolitan Negroes live of necessity in central cities. The committee's report recommends that federal funds be allocated in such a way as to encourage racial integration, bringing together the advantaged and disadvantaged in large area metropolitan cooperation.¹²

For Equality

Two primary arguments are usually advanced for promoting equality of educational opportunity through school taxation. First, a pupil's geographical location should not determine or limit the quality of his education. Second, it is argued that while "beneficial" local taxation for purely local benefits (such as garbage collection) may be appropriate for purely local support, "onerous" taxation for purposes (like education) which are of concern to the entire nation should be supported nationally.¹³ We might add to the first principle that neither a person's "race" nor the economic position of his parents should determine the quality of his education, and to the second that the world-wide awareness of our treatment of minorities and of widespread urban unrest has serious effects on our country's international posture.

In a historical analysis of local and school politics in a suburban community, it was concluded that education issues are usually not of concern to most laymen unless

¹¹ Pettigrew, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹³ Charles S. Benson. *The Economics of Public Education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961. pp. 218-19.

somehow related to other issues such as zoning, taxation, and industrialization.¹⁴ This may be true particularly when it comes to enforcing laws, rather than making them. It is possible that laws on school attendance could be passed through the lobbying efforts of interested groups (such as those desirous of ending child labor) but could not be effectively enforced until the labor market no longer needed children. If politics is the "art of the possible," legislation designed to alleviate the inequities cited above may be long in coming. A flood of national legislation, and some state and local, has followed the U.S. Supreme Court decisions on school desegregation, but effective enforcement of such laws is slow indeed.

New legislation designed to equalize educational opportunity is possible. The Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations has prepared a model for such legislation on the state level.¹⁵ Since this, however, would not resolve the national problem, federal legislation and federal funds will undoubtedly be necessary. A current court case in Detroit may well result in a landmark decision rivaling *Kalamazoo*¹⁶ and *Brown*¹⁷ in its effects.

Equal Protection of the Laws

A complaint has been filed as a civil action by the Detroit Board of Education and a group of Detroit pupils and their parents, against the State of Michigan and the State

¹⁴ Keith Goldhammer and Roland J. Pellegrin. "Jackson County Revisited." *A Case Study in Politics of Public Education*. University of Oregon Press: Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, 1968. p. 87.

¹⁵ John Shannon. "The Role of the State in Equalizing Educational Opportunity—An ACIR Legislative Proposal." *The Challenge of Change in School Finance*. Proceedings of the 10th National Conference on School Finance. Washington, D.C.: NEA Committee on Educational Finance, 1967. pp. 31-47.

¹⁶ Charles E. Stuart *et al.* v. School District No. 1 of the Village of Kalamazoo, 30 *Michigan*, 1874. This decision by the Michigan State Supreme Court upheld the right of communities to levy and collect taxes for support of public high schools.

¹⁷ *Brown v. Board of Education*, I, 1954. The U.S. Supreme Court outlawed desegregation in schools.

Treasurer, in Wayne County Circuit Court.¹⁸ The complaint alleges that the State has failed to discharge its obligation to provide for free public education on an equal basis for all, in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States: ". . . nor shall any State . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws."

The complaint charges that by its application of the School Aid Act of 1957, and especially its formula for apportionment of state aids, substantial disparities exist in financing public education in the several districts, and that the State denies equal educational opportunity by failing to relate aid to the varying needs and resources of the districts, failing to take into account substantial differences in costs of buildings and personnel, and failing to provide for the added costs of educating disadvantaged pupils in urban areas.

The Court is requested to declare the School Aid Act void as "repugnant to the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment," and, after giving the Legislature a reasonable time to reapportion State funds to provide equal opportunity, permanently enjoin the Treasurer from further execution of the Act if it fails to do so. The Court is requested then to order an equitable distribution.

While this will probably take years, and may well come at length to the U.S. Supreme Court, the case is an epochal one, with possible consequences more far-reaching than almost any other.

It seems worthy of note that *The Short-Changed Children of Suburbia*, even in its "action program," suggests no changes in those political-economic-demographic-legal conditions which brought about the provincialism described there.¹⁹ Perhaps this case will make such changes. □

¹⁸ Board of Education of the School District of the City of Detroit. "Complaint." *A General Civil Action v. The State of Michigan and Allison Green, Its Treasurer, in the Circuit Court for the County of Wayne* (Miller, Canfield, Paddock, and Stone, Attorneys for Plaintiffs; undated typescript); case pending.

¹⁹ Miel, *op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

Copyright © 1968 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.