

The Destruction of Black Schools: An American Tragedy

JAMES A. BANKS

A HANDSOME young Black boy with an African hair style was in mid-air reaching for a rapidly approaching volley ball; a grey haired, retired English teacher was proudly cleaning up her crowded desk; an attractive Black girl sitting behind an old desk was planning a candy sale during her lunch hour. These events took place in a Southern industrial city¹ in a dilapidated, formerly abandoned building which some concerned Black educators, parents, and students had converted into a "Freedom School." I watched these events as the proud, aging principal told me about why he quit his job in the Southtown Public Schools to start the Freedom School when the Board of Education—in order to "integrate" the schools—shut down the Black junior high school and bused Black students to white schools.

The embittered school head told me how the Freedom School exists on a shoestring budget (all of its money comes from private donations), how two classes are held in one room, and how some of his teachers fled in midyear because of the rock bottom salaries which he is forced to pay those who get salaries. While he pointed out the blatantly obvious shortcomings of the school, what he stressed, in both his gestures and speech,

¹ Hereafter referred to as "Southtown."

and what I could see, was the *pride in blackness* which permeated the antiquated building.

The boy jumping for the ball in the room which had been converted into a "gym," the old English teacher who came to help the school without pay, and the girl who gave up her lunch hour to direct a candy drive to keep the school going—all were signs that the people in the Freedom School were proud of it and of themselves, and were determined to show "Whitey" that they were not going to be forced to go to the "other school."

A Shaky Future

The Freedom School in Southtown has only about a hundred students and a shaky future. Most of the Black children enrolled in the white school when their neighborhood school was closed. Standing in the headmaster's office of the Freedom School, you can get a bird's eye view of the closed school building—which is sparkling and attractive—and it is an eternal, poignant symbol of the bitterness which the Black community felt when its school was closed, and the children were forced to go to white schools which they believe, and for good reasons, are hostile. Although the Freedom School is

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small, is physically inadequate, and has an uncertain destiny, its existence epitomizes the Black response to one of the most myopic and inhuman attacks by the White Establishment on the Black Community.

Throughout the South, and in many other regions of the nation, school districts are responding to federal demands to "integrate" schools by closing down Black schools, giving Black professionals menial jobs, and making Black students take long bus rides and back seats in newly desegregated settings. The problem is compounded by the fact that most administrators and teachers in predominantly white schools want "integration" even less than do Blacks. They communicate their feelings to Black students in both subtle and overt ways. Thus, Blacks, throughout the country, are paying a dual price for the physical desegregation of American public schools. They are told, by actions and sometimes by words, that their schools, and therefore their culture and life styles, are not good enough for white students; thus

transfer and busing are rarely two-way processes. Black students' culture and self-concepts are denigrated in mixed schools by administrators, teachers, and students who know little and care less about their culture, life styles, aspirations, and needs for *power*.

The attacks upon and destruction of Black schools by the White Establishment represent one of the most tragic recent developments in American society. These events tell Black students what white society has been trying to make Blacks believe since they landed on American shores: that they are inferior and less than human. These actions reinforce the false and tenuous sense of racial superiority held by whites, and develop within them an insidious ethnocentrism which is inimical to the creation and perpetuation of a humane society. At a time in our history when Blacks desperately need to develop group cohesion, pride, political *power*, and institutions which they control, their schools (which should be the primary places where these attitudes and skills are developed) are being systematically destroyed by the White Power Structure.

Blacks may lose the battle to save their schools, like most that they have fought with the White Establishment, but they won't lose it because they are not going to fight. The Black high school in Southtown, which is one of the finest schools in the nation that I have ever visited, is scheduled for the chopping block in 1974. Already some Black students, and some enlightened whites who are their allies, are forming pressure groups that are willing to fight for what they feel is a highly moral cause. They are a serious and thoughtful group of young people who are not going to be silenced by the Southtown Board of Education before a bitter struggle takes place. The spirit of their determination is reflected in this excerpt from a recent student newspaper which they published:

The [Carver] school has long been a beacon for the Black community of [Southtown]. Graduates of years past take active interest and participate in school assemblies and sports events. It is a point in common for Blacks in [Southtown], a symbol of unity. And it is not in the best interests of the powers that be that any

minority be united. . . . There must be a unified Black community to throw themselves head first into the melee. And a unified front of whites, sympathetic to the continuance of Black culture and dignity. The word must be *oneness*.

Southtown is just one example in which resistance to the destruction of Black schools and colleges is being adamantly mounted by Blacks.

An Open Society

The real issue in this serious problem is not whether we should have physically mixed schools, but whether we are committed to creating an *open society* in which individuals can fully participate without regard to their ethnic, cultural, or social class identity. To create an open society, we must respect the *legitimacy* of the cultures of each ethnic group within America, and share *power* with excluded and oppressed groups. We violate both the culture and integrity of a group when we close its schools and take away the power and unity which these schools symbolize.

If school districts must respond to federal laws by physically mixing schools (however, Americans have an unusual ability to evade those laws which they do not want to enforce), they should send whites to pre-

dominantly Black schools, as well as Blacks to white schools. *But Black schools should not be closed*, and Black professionals must be allowed to maintain leadership roles in white controlled schools. It is also imperative that school districts, prior to sending Black children to hostile white schools, implement intensive in-service training to help dominant group teachers to understand the cultures of ethnic minority groups.

Colleges of education must play a major role in humanizing teachers. *They should require all teacher education students to take courses which will acquaint them with ethnic minority cultures, and with effective ways to teach children from different cultural groups.* School districts should also overhaul the curriculum, in both white and Black schools, because most materials and textbooks are still written from a white Anglo-Saxon point of view, and contain information which justifies the oppression of powerless ethnic groups.

The systematic destruction of Black schools in America when they are most needed to help Blacks to develop group pride, cohesion, and power is almost certain to lead to societal chaos and hostility which will one day explode.

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