

More Blacks are graduating from high school and going to college, but many still attend segregated schools.

Black Progress Toward Educational Equity

The belief in equity and equality of opportunity is an idea purported to be synonymous with the founding of the United States. For black Americans, however, both equity and equality are now, as they have always been throughout the history of this nation, illusions. The illusions affect U.S. Blacks politically, socially, educationally, economically, and in fact, at literally every juncture of American life.

Black communities throughout this country are populated with individuals who on a daily basis face barriers to equal opportunity in employment, housing, access to adequate medical care, and fair treatment under the law. Therefore, we need to continuously assess whether equality and/or equity is being attained in education.

Traditionally, progress regarding social and human phenomena is measured with a variety of descriptive statistics, typically displayed in an array of charts and tables with corresponding figures delineating levels of significance and so on. Many previous summaries of black progress in education have followed this format. Unfortunately, many of these studies have been emotion-laden and disjunctive, and have tended to obscure rather than define the real educational issues. This is due in part to the language used in the landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which barred legal segregation in public schools. An example from one of the decision's footnotes illustrates this point (National Institute of Education, 1976):

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Segregation of white and black children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the black children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to retard educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system.

The legal principles and social ideals expressed in *Brown* have tended to distort the perceptions of educational and social researchers. These distortions are evident in (1) the obliteration of early black educational history, (2) erroneous indicators of equity and equality, (3) a failure to discuss progress within the full context of the American socioeconomic milieu. Thus, any discussion of the research on black progress in educational equity must be concerned not only with research results, but with the nature of the research as well.

Literature about black attempts to achieve equality in education continuously reinforces the 1954 *Brown* decision as the pivotal point for measurement; yet there is a wealth of earlier history. As far back as the mid-1700s, Thomas Jefferson espoused the judgment that Blacks were intellectually inferior. His opinions and those of other politicians, judges, and intellectuals initiated a 200-year chain of events that is ultimately tied to *Brown*. In 1740, for example, the State of South Carolina enacted the first compulsory ignorance law, which was followed by similar laws in other Southern

states (Weinberg, 1977). In the North, state governments simply refused to acknowledge any responsibility to educate black children. After Rhode Island liberated slaves in 1784, the legislature failed to honor a provision in the Emancipation Bill making it compulsory to teach freed Negro children to read and write (Bremmer, 1970). Some states, such as Ohio, completely closed public schools to black children.

The educational gains Blacks won during Reconstruction were all but eliminated by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision regarding interstate transportation. Its effect was devastating because it declared that separate-but-equal interstate accommodations were not inconsistent with the 14th Amendment. The implications of *Plessy v. Ferguson* became generalized, and for about 30 years a number of Northern and Southern state courts applied the doctrine to public schools.

Of course, the doctrine of separate-but-equal was never equal. For instance, in Mississippi during 1920-21, nearly 80 percent of the population in 19 counties was Black. Black children, however, received less than one-eighth of the amount spent on other children in three other counties (Du Bois, 1926). Separate-but-equal continued throughout the North and South with black parents and organizations challenging the doctrine with minimal success through the 1930s and 40s. Even when Blacks concentrated on the single issue of integration based on residence and neighborhood school attendance, the response from state courts was never favorable. Almost uniformly, state courts acknowledged the authority of local school boards to assign students to schools (Weinberg, 1977). The net effect was that black children

attended school in facilities that were far from their homes, hazardous to health, structurally unsafe, overcrowded, and educationally inferior. This trend continued until mid-1950 when the NAACP Legal Defense Fund began a frontal assault on the principle of segregation, leading eventually to the *Brown* decision (Weinberg, 1977). The decision was initially received with an absence of jubilation in the black community. This response was prophetic in that even today implementation of the Supreme Court mandate has not been realized.

Failure of the country to meet the judicial mandate is directly linked to the second distorted perspective about black educational progress—that is, the emphasis on achievement scores as a predominant variable in the measurement of such progress. Black/white achievement studies prior to 1955 almost universally indicated that black children lagged significantly behind in all major academic areas. For example, the Texas Association of School Administrators in 1954-55 surveyed achievement levels of 80 percent of Texas school children. Results of the study indicated that "In most cases, the achievement of white pupils as measured by standardized test scores was very satisfactory; most Negro pupils were performing unsatisfactorily when judgments were made on the basis of tests (*Southern School News*, 1954). In a 1950 Dade County, Florida, study of arithmetic achievement scores for eighth graders, white children were found to be ahead of national norms while black children lagged behind by two years (*Southern School News*, 1956). Another study in the same year demonstrated that black sixth graders in Nashville were more than two years behind white students in overall achievement. An extended list of similar studies could be compiled. It would appear, however, that the studies all report the obvious—a meaningful relation between poor academic achievement and barriers toward obtaining black educational equity.

Post-1954 research has concentrated on black achievement as a result of integrated or desegregated school attendance. Results from these studies are almost evenly divided be-

tween those indicating nonsignificant achievement gains and those demonstrating important improvements.

Even if it were possible to say which position dominates, the question of progress still could not be answered on the basis of currently published studies. The difficulty arises from the plethora of variables inconsistently examined from study to study. One variable that should be consistently controlled before making comparisons among studies is the grade level of students being examined. Another factor is the socio-economic levels of white and black students. Still another is the racial mix of the school—whether the school is evenly divided between races or consists predominantly of one race. A fourth controlling factor is the number of years students have been desegregated. The age or grade level at which subjects were first exposed to desegregation also warrants consideration, along with the attitude and race of the teacher(s). The emotional environment (the level of community tension or resistance to desegregation) in which subjects are learning and being examined is yet another variable.

Until researchers eliminate the inconsistencies among related variables, we can only conclude that sufficient information is not available to make valid assessments about the attainment of equity by Blacks in education, and that we need to use a more dynamic and encompassing approach. One such approach is to base discussions of black school progress on the total American racial and social milieu. The attainment of equity and the level of black American acceptance in society is mirrored in progress in education; one reflects the other and both represent the nation's progress in creating an equitable environment.

Two social indicators have direct implications for schools. One is related to the ability and willingness of the nation to implement desegregation. The other is concerned with school enrollment, retention, and successful matriculation.

Are Schools Desegregating?

The United States has not fared well in implementing desegregation. Resistance to *Brown* was initiated almost simultaneously with the first

newspaper stories about the decision. Representatives of Southern states warned of widespread difficulties should immediate desegregation be ordered. To reinforce and clarify the 1954 decision, the Supreme Court in May 1955 ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education (II)*; however, no deadline was established for implementation. Instead, federal district courts were to take jurisdiction over school segregation cases (Weinberg, 1977). Because of the absence of specific deadlines, black parents seized the initiative and began filing school entry petitions with local school boards. In most cases, the petitions were rejected and white Southern communities began to retaliate by firing parents of petitioners, cancelling their credit, refusing to sell them food, and ejecting black sharecroppers from the land (Gates, 1964; Morris, 1971). Black parents returned to the courts and unfortunately became the recipients of meaningless assistance. It was not unusual, for example, for states to ignore federal district court rulings favorable to the *Brown* ruling and suffer no penalty whatsoever (Peltason, 1961).

From 1954 until 1960, federal authorities intervened in only five of the ten cases that involved violence in disrupting a court order (Peltason, 1961). Noncompliance in Southern states ranged from closing schools that were ordered to desegregate to ending state aid to desegregated schools. Redirecting and appropriating funds to newly segregated schools became commonplace. Compulsory attendance laws were repealed so that white children were legally able to leave desegregated schools (Stent, 1979).

Whole-scale avoidance of desegregation continued until Title IV of the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964 with reinforcement from Title VI. Through Title IV, authority was given to the U.S. Commissioner of Education to directly aid the desegregation of school districts, and the U.S. Attorney General was provided with legal sanctions to enforce the law. Title VI disallowed the use of federal funds in any program that was racially discriminatory.

The effects of Title IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act were felt primarily in Southern states. Northern states, shielded by extensive patterns of de facto segregation caused by



private actions, not public ones, observed the legal desegregation developments in the South with considerable detachment (Orfield, 1978). However, in a 1971 case involving Charlotte, North Carolina (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 1971), the Supreme Court offered its first decision regarding desegregation in the urban South. As a result of the decision, Southern judges were given discretion to do whatever was necessary and reasonable to end de jure segregation. Northern judges, observing developments involving the Charlotte decision concluded that the segregation they were examining was also de jure and obtained the same powers as judges in the South. In several cases, they ordered prompt citywide busing. The immediate reaction was organized antibusing protests in California, Michigan, and Colorado (Orfield, 1978). National controversy metastasized as lower federal courts began to explore the feasibility of ordering busing to achieve desegregation across school district boundary lines.

The net effect of the controversy has been the development of a variety of evasive maneuvers by Whites, including increased white private/parochial school entry; establishment of segregated private institutions; regressive court decisions (*Milliken v. Bradley*, 1974); and the devastating pattern of increased white migration from central cities with the concomitant unequal appropriation of

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tax dollars in suburban schools as opposed to inner-city schools.

Recent national statistics regarding desegregation are not unequivocally positive. For example, while there are only 0.7 million black students in intensely segregated (80 percent or more minority) small school districts, there are more than three times as many in the large systems (Orfield, 1978). Another study (Foster, 1973) states that large cities outside of Southern and border states show astonishingly high levels of school segregation. In most of these cities, there has been little, if any, improvement. The study further reported that no desegregation plans had been prepared and no litigation was pending.

Additionally, the report states that in the few cases where court orders had produced declines in racial isolation within the central city, a concurrent increase in segregation and racial separation on a metropolitan scale occurred.

Additional information from the Office of Civil Rights (April 12, 1973) indicates that by 1970, Northern schools had become more segregated than those in the South (Figure 1). Other HEW statistics demonstrate that for urban school districts between the 1970-71 and 1974-75 school years, segregation actually became worse in Northern states and stagnated in the Midwest.

Are Black Students Making Progress?

While data regarding desegregation are regressive, conclusions regarding enrollment, retention, and successful matriculation are generally positive. The U.S. Census Bureau and others indicate that there has been a gradual improvement in overall enrollment and median years of school completed by Blacks (Figures 2 and 3). Census statistics also tend to demonstrate that the increased high school enrollment of black teenagers, along with higher retention rates, has resulted in increased educational attainment as measured by number of school years completed. According to 1977 U.S. census figures, high school enrollment rates for Whites increased 3.9 percent; the comparable rate for Blacks was 23.1 percent. Between 1970-1976, the percentage increase of students graduating from high school was significantly higher for Blacks than for Whites. By 1976, 80 percent of American Blacks between the ages of 16 and 17 were enrolled in school compared to 89 percent of Whites in the same age group. Drop-out rates showed similar improvement—the rate for Whites was 8.4 percent compared to 9.5 percent for Blacks (U.S. census figures, July 1977).

Conclusion

The most significant interpretation regarding the continued segregated nature of American schools is the absence of an earnest national commitment for desegregation. Except for the few years of direction during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the Executive Branch has failed miserably in providing the necessary

Figure 1. Percentage of Black Students in Predominantly White Schools

	1968	1970	1972
Southern states	18.4	39.1	44.4
Northern and Western states	27.6	27.5	29.1

Source: HEW, Office of Civil Rights, 12 April 1973.

Figure 2. School Enrollment (Ages 3-34) Percent Change 1970-78

	White	Black
Nursery	63.0	75.3
Kindergarten	-9.4	5.9
Elementary	-17.9	-10.5
High School	1.4	24.1
College	26.0	95.4

Source: U.S. Census, *Population Profile of the U.S.: 1978*, Not. 336, April 1979.

Figure 3. Median Years of School Completed (Ages 25 and over)

	1970	1975
Blacks	9.8	10.9
Whites	12.1	12.4

Source: U.S. Census, *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the U.S.: An Historical View, 1790-1978*.

Figure 4. Master's Degrees Awarded to Blacks, 1964-1976, United States

Year	Annual % Increase	% of Total
1964		16.4
1970		19.6
1971	10.7	20.2
1972	9.2	20.7
1973	4.8	20.7
1974	5.2	21.1
1975	5.6	22.4
1976	6.6	23.4

Source: James R. Mingle, *Degree Output in the South, 1975-76: Distribution by Race* (Georgia: Southern Regional Education Board, 1978).

Figure 5. Total Enrollment — U.S. Law Schools

Year	Number		Percent Black
	Black	White	
1978-79	5,350	121,606	4.39
1977-78	5,305	118,557	4.47
1976-77	5,503	117,451	4.69
1975-76	2,127	116,991	4.38
1974-75	4,995	110,713	4.51

Source: American Bar Association, *A Review of Legal Education in the United States, Fall 1978* (Chicago: American Bar Association, 1979).

Figure 6. First Year U.S. Medical School Enrollments

Year	Number		Percent	
	Black	White	Black	White
1974-75	1,106	12,595	7.5	85.3
1975-76	1,036	13,156	6.8	86.0
1976-77	1,046	13,383	6.7	85.7
1977-78	1,085	13,732	6.7	85.1
1978-79	1,061	14,048	6.4	85.1

Source: Bernard C. Watson, "Education: A Matter of Grave Concern," in *The State of Black America 1980* (New York: National Urban League, 1980).

leadership for a desegregated American school system.

In addition, too few individuals in the academic community have forcefully articulated the necessity and advantages of completely open and integrated schools. Instead, at best, we have been subjected to a series of studies purporting to measure whether desegregation has an effect upon achievement and learning. The real responsibility of the academic community, it seems, is to articulate the existing evidence that desegregation benefits both white and black children, and conversely, that white children do not suffer as a result of integration. A well-articulated statement could be the necessary impetus for a more concerted effort on the part of all federal agencies to enforce currently existing desegregation laws.

At worst, there is a burgeoning and dangerous tendency among a few academicians to report ridiculous and intellectually insulting hypotheses about black racial inferiority, which could well become theories of white superiority. These negative hypotheses (which emanate from research designs with serious methodological faults) are reinforcing persistently negative misconceptions about the learning ability of black children.

Black high school graduation rates began to improve significantly in the past decade. During the 1970s, there was a corresponding increase in Blacks' participation in higher education. Especially noteworthy was 1976—Blacks made significant per-

centage increases in obtaining master's degrees and admission to law and medical schools (see Figures 4-6).

It appears that the real test of integrity for this nation is to translate increases in black high school graduation and retention rates into successful college, graduate, law, and medical school matriculation. ■

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