

# Facing Educational Facts: A Respectful Response to Kenneth Clark

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Reading Kenneth Clark's article, I thought of a saying popular in many black communities: "What goes around comes around." And indeed it does. Here on the verge of the 30th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, one of the preeminent psychologists of our time—a man whose name will always be linked with the *Brown* decision—is calling on educators to provide moral and professional leadership in the continuing effort to desegregate the schools.

For those familiar with the civil rights strategy that led to the school desegregation cases, Clark's call to educators is of more than passing interest. Initially, NAACP lawyers sought out Clark and other social scientists to demonstrate the adverse consequences of segregation. Segregated public schools were deemed the most vulnerable to legal attack, but the major aim of the litigation was the "separate but equal" doctrine that provided the legal foundation for segregation in *all* public facilities.

In litigating the validity of segregated schools, former NAACP staff attorney Robert L. Carter explained, "We had neither sought nor received any guidance from professional educators as to what equal education might connote to them in terms of their educational responsibilities." Carter said that, at the time, he felt no need for such guidance "because of our conviction that equal education meant integrated education."

Carter, now a federal judge, reports that if he were preparing the cases today, instead of looking principally to social



scientists to demonstrate the adverse consequences of segregation, he would

recruit educators to formulate a concrete definition of the meaning of equality in education, and then seek to persuade the Court that the constitutional dimension of equal education must conform to the concept as defined by educators.

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### Are Integrated Schools the Answer?

Clark's commitment to the idea of racially integrated schools as a constitutional necessity came early, and over the years it has not flagged. The question his article raises for me is whether the old idealistic view of what integration might be is sufficient for contemporary conditions. Long experience with school desegregation indicates that even a perfectly integrated school is not an adequate antidote for the racism that continues to poison the body politic. While Clark wants educators to continue the "equal education through integration" crusade, I would join with Judge Carter in seeking expert guidance from educators on just how effective or realistic integration actually is.

Significantly, more and more black school superintendents in the country's largest school systems are opting for a variety of programs designed to improve neighborhood schools, rather than relying on busing for racial balance.

There may be those who doubt that the world would be a better place if the *Brown* decision had been fully implemented in line with Kenneth Clark's vision, but I do not share those doubts. For a half-dozen years during the early 1960s, I traveled across the South as an NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyer, arguing as vigorously as I could that the Supreme Court had in *Brown* mandated the complete integration of formerly segregated public schools.

Thus, I share Clark's hope for the humanizing potential of school integration. But my advocacy was based on more pragmatic concerns. Resistance to any form of compliance with *Brown* was so fierce that only desegregation plans requiring the balancing of students and teachers by race would prevent school officials from maintaining segregation if at all possible.

But that was 20 years ago. Today, a majority of nonwhite children attend school in the nation's largest districts. Enrollment in these districts, with few exceptions, is heavily black and Hispanic. Integration of these children with white children in suburban districts can be ordered by courts only if civil rights lawyers can prove that the suburban school districts were responsible for the larger district's racial isolation. And

even when such proof can be obtained, racial balance remedies are horribly expensive and politically unpopular among substantial percentages of white and black parents alike.

If integration was, as Clark insists, the very essence of the *Brown* decision, civil rights advocates would have no alternative but to continue to press for the desegregation remedies recognized by the courts in the early 1970s. But for longer than I like to remember, I have been urging that the essential remedy for school segregation provided in *Brown* was an equal educational opportunity, and that integration through racial balance and busing should be viewed as one, but not the sole, means by which equal educational opportunity could be obtained.

The statement of my position illustrates its difficulty. It is logically attractive to view integration as the balanced opposite of segregation; one urges the former to eliminate the latter. Schools defined by race were the mark of segregation, so any all-black school must be a segregated school, a remnant of the pre-*Brown* era to be eliminated at the earliest moment.

But it is clear now—as perhaps it was not when the odious oppressiveness of forced separation by race was established legal policy—that racial segregation was a manifestation of white superiority. It was much more than a mechanism through which blacks could be kept from attending school with whites. It was also a barrier to black parents' participation in school policy making. In a racially segregated school system, school resources could be funneled to white children, and black parents would be denied even the opportunity to participate in the educational decisions regarding their children.

The sad truth of a great deal of the school desegregation that has occurred is that placing blacks and whites in the same schools does not, as we had hoped, ensure equal educational opportunity for black children. Policy setting continues to give priority to whites, whose needs are equated with "quality schooling." The special needs of black children, particularly if they are poor, are viewed as "remediation." In short, some of the worst and most damaging

aspects of the segregated school system can be, and often are, perpetuated in schools that, by racial count, are desegregated.

### Meeting the Needs of Black Children

I am concerned about poor black children whose learning potential may be better realized through teaching materials and approaches designed to meet their needs when such materials and methods may be less suitable for children from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. It is difficult to implement such an approach in schools that have limited funds and a majority of middle-class white students. But even advantaged black children can have difficulty in predominantly white schools, where the assumption is that all children will benefit from being treated as if they are white, and where sensitivity to black concerns is limited to a cursory observance of Martin Luther King's birthday.

Appropriate alternatives to racial balance remedies have been approved by courts in school desegregation cases in such cities as Atlanta, Detroit, and Dallas. These alternatives require real effort, and they face opposition—some of it motivated by forces similar to those that underlay opposition to integration remedies. But the alternative remedies do *not* include doing nothing, as the current Administration seems to think.

Clark's strongly voiced belief that our society can best be made whole through integration remains a goal worthy of respect. And surely educators should be involved in the great work that remains to be done. But achievement of real integration in public education will come more quickly when we begin to heed and act on the advice of educators who have been successful in improving the quality of schools attended primarily by blacks.

Experience shows that when such schools are able to boast of academic achievements through meeting the educational needs of black children, they will attract the parents of white children—more than a few of whom want, with Kenneth Clark, an effective education for their children on an integrated basis. □

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