

school diversity



ALL FOR ONE The goal of court-ordered desegregation was to end educational inequities in our schools.

how far have we come

On the 50th anniversary of the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, *Child* looks back at whether and how desegregation efforts have helped the way our children socialize and learn.

By Andrea Cooper



A NATION DIVIDED In 1960, U.S. Deputy Marshals escorted 6-year-old Ruby Bridges to class; she was the only black child in her school in New Orleans.

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and other factors to assign students, and we got in.

In September of 1999, though, three weeks after school began, a judge changed our lives by issuing a verdict in our city's long-standing school desegregation lawsuit. He ruled that Charlotte, NC, under court order for nearly 30 years to integrate its schools, had

eliminated segregation. Our district had to find a new way to assign students that didn't use race. More than half the system's 100,553 children, including our daughter, might be reassigned. (Luckily, she's been able to stay at her school.)

The court decision led to a three-year uproar, with further legal challenges and numerous student-assignment plans drafted and then thrown out. Finally, a new assignment plan was launched in August 2002, which divides the county into zones. Parents may choose from their neighborhood school, other schools in their zone, or magnet schools.

The U.S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision 50 years ago this month, on May 17, 1954. The case, which embedded into our national consciousness the idea that separate could never be equal, was supposed to end debates like this one. The ruling was supposed to even out inequities in our schools, giving all kids the same opportunity to achieve.

But parents and school boards across the country are still fighting about whether court-ordered desegregation should continue. To date, there have been more than 700 lawsuits involving several thousand school districts. And a new study by the

Civil Rights Project at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA, contends that in the past 10 years, schools have become increasingly segregated. As communities debate this emotional, complex issue, it's fair to ask: What have busing and all our other efforts to desegregate accomplished? Are we returning to the segregated schools this country knew before the civil-rights era? If so, what does that mean for our children, our schools, and our nation?

The Debate Rages On

The U.S. Supreme Court first upheld busing for the purpose of desegregation in 1971, in *Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. In the past decade, though, courts have increasingly struck down desegregation plans begun years ago and school assignments based on race. Community debate and lawsuits like the ones in Charlotte have been widespread.

Those who are advocating mandatory desegregation, like Terry Belk, a Charlotte parent, believe that equal opportunity can never happen without court orders. There's no political will to guarantee troubled schools will receive what they need otherwise, he says. His 15-year-old son and 13-year-old daughter didn't go to their neighborhood school "for good reason," says Belk, who is black. He describes the facility as being run-down, with a disproportionate number of inexperienced teachers. Children there receive such an inferior education that they're harmed for the rest of their lives, struggling in low-paying jobs, he says.

Proponents of neighborhood schools are equally passionate. It's hard to be involved in your child's school or arrange playdates, they say, when school and friends are far away. Some districts have

When our daughter turned 4, my husband and I started visiting elementary schools, searching for the best. One public magnet school came highly praised. Yet as I stood in a kindergarten class there, I felt unexpectedly anxious. Would my daughter, who's white, fit in and feel comfortable in a school that's half black? I wanted her to be exposed to kids of diverse races and backgrounds, in contrast to my childhood in suburban Chicago, which was sheltered and homogeneous. But now, face to face with change, I had doubts. Among my own friends growing up, there had been an undeniable coziness in being the same.

I looked around the classroom again, suddenly ashamed of my concerns. Here were children excited about learning, and two teachers—one white, one black—whom the students seemed to love. The school, about 30 minutes from our home, ranked among the top five in the state, based on test scores. Many parents were active volunteers, and the principal clearly was happy to be here. My husband and I decided we would be too. We applied through our district's magnet-school lottery, which used race



BUSING BEGINS In 1971, the Supreme Court upheld busing for the aim of desegregating schools.

adjusted their assignment plans annually for racial balance, which means children might be reassigned to different schools two or three times before they reach fifth grade. "Part of what makes a school work is that it's part of a community," says Robin Shaw, a Charlotte mother of two kids, ages 12 and 10. "I don't have any reservations about my children being with kids from other backgrounds," says Shaw, who is white. "In fact, I wish there were more of a mix at our school. But is racial mix our priority, or is it parent involvement due to proximity? For me, parent involvement wins out."

Some people feel divided. When St. Louis had court-ordered busing, teacher Sheryl Davenport saw kids who woke at 5:45 a.m. to prepare for the hourlong bus ride to school. If they missed the bus, the kids simply didn't show up. Still, desegregation gave some children opportunities they wouldn't have had otherwise. "They got to be in accelerated classes or in smaller classrooms where they received more attention," Davenport says.

Diverse Yet Separate

This debate is peaking at a time of great change in the U.S. Judging from the 2000 census, our children will work and raise families in a nation more diverse than ever before. The Hispanic population, for example, has soared 58% in the last 10 years, from 22.4 million in 1990 to 35.3 million today. In addition to that, for the first time census respondents could identify themselves as belonging to more than one race; more than 6 million people did.

In spite of this growing diversity, it's not always easy for kids to feel comfortable with peers outside their own ethnic group, says Stephen Quintana, Ph.D., a professor of counseling psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education. "Observation tells

kids that everyone is not the same," says Dr. Quintana. "It's helpful if parents can listen to their children and offer them an opportunity to reflect on what they've observed." (See the age-by-age guide on page 158.) He emphasizes that in the future, being able to interact with other racial groups will be an important skill in career advancement and job satisfaction.

Against this backdrop of change, school segregation is on the rise, according to several studies by Gary Orfield, Ph.D., co-director of the Civil Rights Project at Harvard, and his colleagues. In a January 2004 report analyzing decades of federal data, they found that the average white student attends a school where four out of five children are white. Black and Latino students go to schools where two-thirds of the students are black and Latino. Surprisingly, it's the rural and small-town school districts that are the most racially integrated, while schools in large and medium cities and their suburbs are the most segregated.

Children of different races don't mix after school either. A recent analysis of the 2000 census at the State University of New York at Albany determined that our country's children still remain clearly divided into separate neighborhoods by race. Black, Latino, and Asian kids are more segregated from white children than are adults in these groups, who at least get to interact at work, says John Logan, Ph.D., director of the university's Mumford Center, which conducted the study.

When a school happens to be segregated by race, it also tends to be segregated by class and income, notes Dr. Orfield, who found that 88% of mostly minority schools had high levels of poverty, with more than half the students receiving

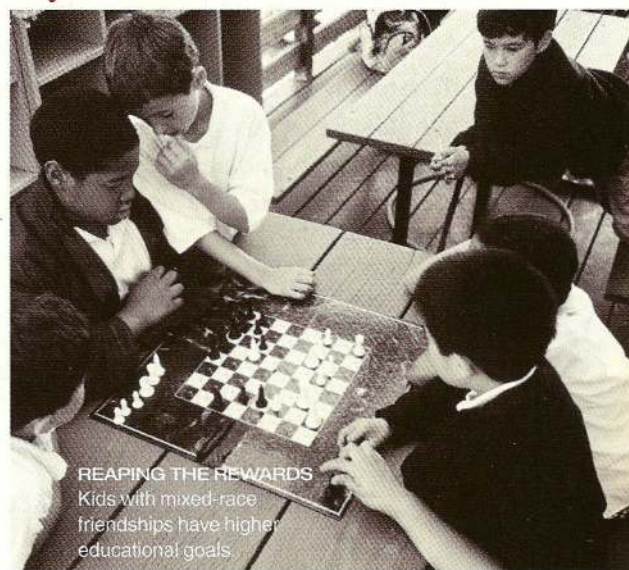
free lunches. Compare that to only 15% of mostly white schools that had high poverty. Dr. Orfield believes that poverty levels are strongly related to test-score averages and many forms of educational inequality.

A Failed Public Policy?

How have desegregation efforts so far affected children's performance? They haven't helped, some argue. "In general, minority students in desegregated schools don't fare all that differently in test scores and dropout rates than their counterparts in primarily single-race schools," says David Armor, Ph.D., a public policy professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, who has studied test scores in schools that were desegregated. The reason? Desegregation never addressed the root of the problem, he says, which is family influence, such as the parents' education level and poverty at home.

Dr. Orfield, who says the "separate but equal" doctrine never worked, points out that there are several long-term benefits

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REAPING THE REWARDS Kids with mixed-race friendships have higher educational goals.



COLOR-BLIND Classmates enjoy lunch at a desegregated school in Berkeley, CA, in 1971.

of desegregation. Studies have shown that black and white children with mixed-race friendships have higher educational goals than those with same-race friendships and that kids of all races who attend a diverse school become more comfortable with people of different racial groups, are more invested in their communities, and tend to interact more with people of different races as adults.

Still, the courts are turning away from desegregation. Several Supreme Court decisions paved the way. For Oklahoma City in 1991 and DeKalb County, GA, in 1992, the Supreme Court ruled that districts no longer had to use busing to integrate schools if they'd made a good-faith effort to do so in the past. In 1995, the Supreme Court said a federal judge had interfered too much in trying to desegregate schools in Kansas City, MO.

Parents are divided over the issue. Nearly 60% of respondents said more should be done to integrate the nation's classrooms, according to one Gallup poll. Yet 82% also agreed that letting students go to their neighborhood schools would be better than achieving racial balance through busing. The solution, most people felt, is to devote more money and other resources to minority schools.

Finding a Fair Solution

Some experts see the next frontier as "equity"—ensuring that every school offers students the resources they need, perhaps in the form of smaller classes or special tutoring. Schools serving mostly low-income kids might need more money than the average school to

improve equipment and facilities and to attract experienced teachers.

But that isn't happening, according to a 2003 report by the Education Trust, a nonprofit group in Washington, DC, that advocates for low-income and minority students. It found that in most states, districts that educate the largest number

of low-income and minority students receive far less state and local money than wealthy, predominantly white districts. The average gap was \$1,020 per student. "The very kids who most need a high-quality education are in schools with the fewest resources to provide that," says Kati Haycock, the group's director. ➤

Through a Child's Eyes

I've often told my children that what's inside is most important. I thought this lesson was learned. But outsiders got in the way. By Liza Jaipaul

"People are looking at me because I'm ugly, Mommy," my then 5-year-old said to me one day in a pizza shop. "What do you mean? You're the most handsome boy I know," I told him. And he is, which is why it hurt to hear him say he was ugly.

He pulled me over to the wall of mirrors in the back of the restaurant. "See," he said, pointing. "I'm brown and everyone else here is white or beige. I'm ugly." I was shocked. I pointed to myself and told him that I am even darker. "Does that mean I'm ugly too?" He immediately said, "No. But you're my mommy. You're pretty."

As weeks went by he insisted he was unattractive because he's not white. My ethnic background is Indian and my husband's is Puerto Rican. My boys' uncles are African-American, Caucasian, and Latino. We read books with characters of different colors. His older brother, who is several shades darker than him, is his hero.

I've often told my children that what's inside is most important. I thought this lesson was learned. But outsiders got in the way.

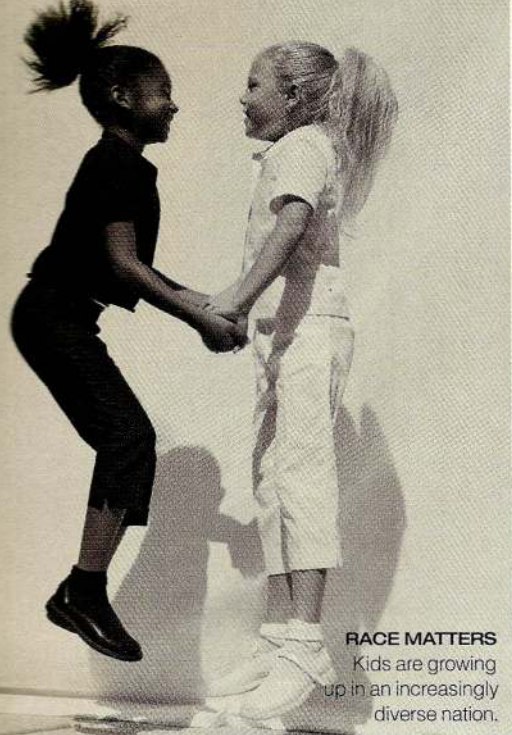
A week before our trip to the pizza shop, my son was with two friends, a girl and a boy. The boy said to the girl, "Look. I'm all covered with white and so are you." Then he pointed to my son. "He's covered with brown. Which one do you like better?" She replied that she liked white, and my son's face fell. When he began to cry, saying that the girl liked the other boy better than him, I explained that they were talking about skin color, not the person inside. Another time, my son and a friend were fighting because neither one of them wanted to play with the black action figure. They both viewed him as the bad guy.

I've begun to wonder if we, as parents and as a society, do enough to address the issue of race. In school our kids are supposed to be treated equally. They even have multicultural days and months when they're supposed to celebrate diversity. But do they really? Do they read an equal, or even a representative, number of books about minority children? What if your child is one of a few in a class? Does the teacher consider this when teaching?

All children should be talked to about race. Many white parents have said to me, "But we don't even think about color. My children don't say anything about it." They may not—for now. Young children may notice a child's skin color and not attach any meaning to it. But they still might hear racist comments and repeat them.

All kids should read stories about different races and play with toys that reflect diversity. Even then, issues will come up. Many people—well-intentioned people—pretend race does not matter. It does matter, though, and we should be more open about the subject. Perhaps then there won't be a 5-year-old boy who thinks he's ugly because he has brown skin.

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RACE MATTERS
Kids are growing up in an increasingly diverse nation.

One of the goals of the No Child Left Behind act is to help close the achievement gap between poor and minority students and their peers. No Child Left Behind advocates regular testing and

stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control of schools, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. If a school has failed to make adequate progress to meet state standards for two consecutive years, parents may pull their child out of it and select another public school.

Like almost everything in education, No Child Left Behind is controversial. Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association in Washington, DC, says the act aims to improve teacher quality but doesn't increase the funding for teacher training. "It's wrong to promise a qualified, certified teacher in every classroom and then freeze the budget for teacher-quality programs," says Weaver. Others point out that while


the act increased funding for Title I (disadvantaged) schools, it still fell short of the amount originally promised.

And while No Child Left Behind is giving high-poverty districts additional resources, states have to do their part, too, Haycock says. One way to help at-risk kids would be to rely less on local property taxes to fund schools. Instead, a greater share of school funding would come from state budgets. States could then target poor districts when distributing income-tax or sales-tax revenues.

"I say, 'Bus the money, not the kids,'" argues Thomas Sadler, a Charlotte father of five grown children and grandfather of 13. "Give our children the tools and they'll get the job done." Sadler, who is black, helped obtain a new school for his neighborhood rather than have local kids bused seven miles to class.

If the issue of equal education does turn from desegregation to funding, we will face stark problems. With many states and communities in fiscal crisis, how many are willing to infuse money into education budgets? And if more money does become available for the sub-par schools, will it produce lasting results?

No matter how we focus our national debate about education, class, and race, it still leaves communities like Charlotte searching for harmony. It will take our getting to know one another better, I realized as I waited for a pep rally at my daughter's school to begin. From across the room, a black friend of hers ran over to give me a hug. As we embraced, it was hard to fathom what I had been afraid of a couple of years ago, before my daughter had black friends. As it turns out, my daughter's school is teaching me too. **G**

 How do you feel about how racial diversity is handled in your child's school? To share your thoughts and get suggestions for children's books that teach about differences, go to www.child.com/web_links.

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Talking About Race: An Age-by-Age Guide

One day you're standing in an elevator and your 3-year-old points to a person of a different race, blurting out, "Mommy, that man has a funny color skin." What do you say? With the help of Rebecca Bigler, Ph. D., an associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, who has studied children's racial attitudes, we've highlighted what children understand about race and how to talk to them about it.

Ages 6 months to 1 year Studies show that babies recognize differences in skin color and hair textures. Even before they can talk to their children, parents can teach through their actions. In addition, do your best to expose your child to a diverse environment. It's important for kids to see their parents interact socially with people of other racial and ethnic groups.

Ages 2 to 3 When children become more vocal, it's normal for them to spontaneously start talking about skin color. So help your child by replying in a calm, positive tone, "Yes, he does have brown skin. It's not the same as yours, but it's a really nice color too." It's also fine to bring up people's physical differences before your child does. A smart time to do this is when you're playing with toys and already pointing out various physical attributes: "This doll has a hat on, that one doesn't; this one has dark skin, that one doesn't."

Ages 4 to 6 It's common for children this age to assign positive traits to people of their own ethnic group and negative traits to people who look different. As a result, you may hear troubling comments like "That boy has funny-looking eyes" or "Her skin is dirty." The best way to respond is to rebut these statements in a calm, straightforward manner ("Her skin isn't dirty, it's just not like yours. People are all different skin colors").

Ages 7 to 8 Racial attitudes tend to improve around this age. Children become receptive to the idea that we're different and alike at the same time, so stress this concept whenever possible. For example, if your child points out that a friend at school has hair texture that's different from his, say, "That's true, his hair isn't like yours, is it? But you both love playing baseball." The key is to find a way to point out similarities so your child doesn't get the idea that children of another race are so very different from him.

—Kara Corridan