SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

An Educator's View

MICHAEL D. USDAN

Teachers College, Columbia University

THE RECENT LITERATURE ON SCHOOL DESEGREGATION takes on added significance when viewed from the dramatic and frightening perspective of a summer of widespread rioting. *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (the Coleman Report), the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights document *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools*, and Raymond W. Mack's *Desegregation and Education: Studies on the Equality of Educational Opportunities Provided for Americans of Different Races in Ten Communities* set in bold relief the pivotal role education must play in mitigating the deleterious consequences of racial segregation.

These documents pose very basic questions about the role of public education in American society. School boards and administrators are criticized for their "stand-pattism," proclivity for "not rocking the boat," and refusal to take the initiative in desegregating the school systems they lead. A common response to such charges is that the schools are in business to educate and not to integrate or ameliorate.

Much of the racial controversy that has engulfed school systems throughout the nation cannot be resolved until there is some philosophical agreement about what the role of the schools can and should be. Many educational leaders in responding to criticisms of their inaction on school desegregation would pose the same question as the woman from Riverside, California, who as quoted in Troy Duster's chapter in the Mack volume, asked school officials "Are you in the business of social reform, or are you in the business of educating children on how to read and write?" Until some kind of consensus is reached on this essential query many educators and the ghetto dwellers they service will remain at loggerheads.

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More than thirty years ago George Counts raised the question, "Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?" The three aforementioned works on school desegregation drive home, emphatically, to the reader the inextricable relationship between the schools and the home and community environment of children. The point appears to be made abundantly clear that the schools must ameliorate as well as educate. Improved educational opportunities must be supplemented with the amelioration of home and community environments and expanded vocational offerings for the unskilled and unemployed thousands in the nation's teeming and volatile ghettos. What is needed is not a piece-meal fragmented patching job offering uncoordinated improvements in education, housing, and employment opportunities but a concerted coordinated thrust in which all societal agencies including the schools act jointly to ameliorate the lives of the poor.

This type of approach has particularly profound implications for education. Schools have traditionally been isolated and insulated from the mainstream of government in American life. Education has been regarded as a distinct and very special governmental function that must remain outside the corrupting maelstrom of conventional politics. This belief in the separation of education from politics is pervasive in educational circles. Cognizance of this basic tenet of the educator's catechism is imperative if one is to understand the rather bland posture of many professional educators on the issue of school desegregation.

Many school administrators remember only too vividly the days when ward politicians ran school systems on a patronage basis, particularly in large cities. As public schools grew in importance in the twentieth century, laudable and successful efforts were made to divorce them from the blatantly political environment in which many educational systems were compelled to operate. This separation of school systems from general government became institutionalized through state statutes which, for example, provided that school board elections be held at different times than general elections.

This implementation of the ideology of separation from general politics has been a mixed blessing for American education. The cleansing of big city school systems from the ravages of political patronage is certainly to be applauded as is the freedom this separation has afforded many educators from partisan impingements into school issues. Separation from general government has given educational leaders great autonomy and its benefits cannot be minimized. There is another side to

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the issue, however; a side that indicates that this separation may have emasculated educational leadership. This merits some amplification.

By totally separating themselves from general government, educators lose as well as gain. They lose the ability to influence policy decisions in governmental realms other than the schools. This has particular bearing on the issue of school desegregation. If meaningful school integration is to take place, residential housing patterns should and must be desegregated. The power to make decisions in the housing realm lies with a mayor or other general governmental officials. In big cities like Chicago, for example, the root cause of school segregation is the massive public housing developments which are almost totally inhabited by Negroes. The schools are confronted with a segregated *fait accompli.* They have the task of providing educational facilities for thousands of Negro youngsters packed into burgeoning ghettos and school desegregation thus becomes more difficult to achieve. The same situation is found in urban areas throughout the country. School administrators and board members thus have some justification for becoming miffed when charges of perpetuating segregation are leveled at them. They are powerless to influence housing patterns but still are vulnerable targets for criticisms that they condone segregated education.

The separation of education from the mainstream of politics has perhaps its most significant impact in influencing the operating style and policy commitments of administrators and school board members. The insulation and isolation of educators from politics instinctively cause them to shy away from controversial and violatile social issues. Attitudinally many thus retreat from the broader social issues of the day and "tend to their own business," namely the formal educational process that occurs within the school setting.

In recent years this wall of separation has been increasingly more difficult to maintain. An issue like racial desegregation is multi-faceted and pervasively affects every aspect of society. The school cannot ignore it. The schools have unwillingly been dragged into racial ferment and like it or not are expected by their clientele and increasing numbers of people to ameliorate as well as educate. The urban community school approach and the breaking down of what Robert Havighurst calls the "four-walls" school concept are gaining increasing currency in urban areas.

The difficult fact to face for our entire society as well as educators is that our school systems as well as other governmental agencies are simply not doing the job that must be done in the nation's racial ghettos.

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Before unjustly ascribing any blame to anyone, however, it is only fair to note parenthetically that our affluent society has barely appropriated to our urban school systems enough resources to minimally educate much less ameliorate. The fiscal crisis confronting our large cities is monumental. Equality of educational opportunity has become a farce in the United States. School systems in the richer suburbs with more advantaged students are more generously supported than urban school systems with hundreds of thousands of disadvantaged youngters. The students who need the most support, in other words, are receiving the least. More money is a *sine qua non* for equalizing educational opportunities for Negro youngsters.

A major change is apparently needed in our approach to educating minority youngsters. The Coleman Report, which is the most comprehensive analysis yet undertaken of the inequalities which exist in American education, in addition to documenting the extent and deleterious impact of racial segregation most disturbingly presents data which indicate that the schools have a negative impact on Negro youngsters. The finding that indicates that the longer Negro youngsters stay in school the further they lag behind white peers is shocking, to say the least. In the metropolitan northeast region Negroes at grades 6, 9, and 12 are behind whites 1.6, 2.4, and 3.3 years respectively in achievement tests measuring skills in reading, writing, calculating, and problem-solving. Is it any wonder that ghetto parents are literally up-in-arms about the quality of education offered their children? Something is dramatically wrong with the educational process if the achievement levels of students become progressively worse the longer they stay in school. At the twelfth grade level the results of verbal and non-verbal tests indicated that in every case the scores of minority youngsters were further behind majority peers than were the scores of minority first graders.

It is apparent from results such as these in the Coleman Report and data in *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools* that the schools are not compensating for non-school handicaps. The ravages of poverty and limited home and community environments confront many ghetto youngsters with insuperable handicaps. Socioeconomic factors appear to be of transcendent importance. The schools themselves seem to have little impact on pupil achievement in the face of low socioeconomic environments. Youngsters with strong family backgrounds regardless of their race did well. The tragedy is that youngsters from low socioeconomic backgrounds are the very ones who depend most upon quality education to

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compensate for their frequently debilitating handicaps. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights document points out that these social class conditions are exacerbated by racial isolation which the Commission regards as the "heart of the matter."

The Negro parent knows only too well that his child's chances for success are predicated upon provision of a quality education. No other institution has social penetration comparable to that of the school which alone among agencies reaches every young person in a community. Troy Duster alludes to Ely Chinoy's study of the aspirations of auto workers in the Detroit factories. These workers, Chinoy found, while resigned to their own prosaic and somewhat limited futures had loftier aspirations for their children. Many Negro parents too have transferred their dreams of success to their children and education undeniably is the irreplaceable pathway to success in an increasingly complex and technological society. This means that the schools will be subjected to increased scrutiny by parents who will not be content to accept uncritically paternalistic explantions of why their youngsters are not learning.

A critically important concomitant of this interest in education is the belief held by some Negroes that quality education by definition must be integrated education. The Coleman Report stresses the importance of the peer relationship in the educational process. The aspirational level of a disproportionate number of Negro students is reduced, for example, because they have fewer mothers who have graduated from high school, come from poorer and larger families, receive less parental attention, and are less frequently enrolled in college prep programs. Negro schools offered fewer courses in academic areas like English, math, science, and study of a foreign language. The Coleman Report indicates how predominantly Negro schools seem to lag behind white schools in the quality of teachers provided. Teachers in the schools attended predominantly by Negroes frequently attended academically inferior colleges, had less experience, and scored relatively poorly on a thirty-word vocabulary test. Academic-type facilities are less available to the bulk of Negro youngsters who have less access to physics, chemistry, and language labs than their white counterparts. While Negro schools did have somewhat better cafeteria facilities, white students had more books in their school libraries and more access to extracurricular activities of an academic nature. Predominantly white schools, for example, had more extensive opportunities for student activities like debating and the school newspaper.

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Findings such as these in the Coleman Report cannot help but further reinforce the critical importance of school desegregation as an immutable goal to many whites as well as Negroes. The somewhat tenuous evidence in the Coleman Report that attending an integrated school improved the reading and math achievement levels of Negro students, if substantiated in future studies, will have a profound impact on efforts to achieve more meaningful school desegregation in the United States.

Racial Isolation in the Public Schools presents similar findings. Negro students reportedly performed more satisfactorily in an integrated school setting. Negroes who attended racially isolated schools had "lower self-esteem," were more prone "to accept the assignment of inferior status," and were more alienated from whites than Negroes who attended relatively integrated schools. The performance of Negro students is contingent upon the racial composition of their schools as well as the social class characteristics which are so important in all educational settings. Racially isolated schools "tend to lower Negro students' achievement and restrict their aspirations."

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report comments discouragingly on the effects of the compensatory education programs which have been initiated thus far throughout the country. Although disadvantaged youngsters did show some initial improvement, gains were not sustained and participants in the compensatory education programs demonstrated no significantly higher academic achievement than non-participants. The Commission in its document acknowledges the beneficial aspects of compensatory education programs. It fears, however, that such programs are inherently defective because attempts to solve problems caused by racial and social class isolation cannot be successful when they are made in school settings which themselves are isolated by race and social class.

These rather negative findings vis-a-vis compensatory education obviously also have great import for future policy decisions concerning school desegregation. Many educators and social scientists believe that the findings in both the Coleman and Commission Reports are anything but conclusive. Many of the programs evaluated they contend are still too new and untested to be meaningfully assessed. Some critics of the Reports refuse to accept the implied assumption that quality education is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in a Negro school.

In any event, these two documents make an immense contribution to increasing public understanding of one of the nation's most critical issues. They have precipitated useful and much needed dialogue on the ex-

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tremely complex issue of school desegregation. Whatever their faults (Christopher Jencks in *The New Republic* reportedly described the Coleman Report as reading "like an Agriculture Department bulletin on fertilizer" but added that "it is the most important piece of educational research in years"), the two documents are historically significant pioneering efforts to derive comprehensive facts on an explosive issue of transcendent importance. Reports such as these, which surely will be replicated frequently in the years ahead, finally begin to disseminate some empirically based information on an issue which in the past has generated more emotional heat than intellectual light.

The Coleman Report and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights study are landmarks in educational research. They provide an essential and comprehensive analytical and statistical framework upon which to gain insight into the ramifications of the school desegregation issue. The case studies, edited by Raymond Mack, of ten American communities grappling with educational desegregation, however, provide an infinitely more dynamic and vivid picture of how the issue permeates every phase of our society.

One very salient fact that recurs in the cases is that "protest pays." It appears that our society heeds the requests of its ghettoized minority, only when militancy overtly threatens its tranquility. In case after case and in community after community the minority was listened to only when the status quo was threatened or altered in some way. Riverside, California, for example, instituted a school desegregation program after an elementary school mysteriously burned down.

In the Mississippi Delta "moderate" local Negro and white leadership was heeded only after more bellicose civil rights volunteers arrived to work with SNCC, COFO, and the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches. These newcomers "forced the hand" of the indigenous civil rights leadership, and "the mantle of radicalism found new shoulders." Moderates on racial issues who a short time before had been regarded as radicals were now labeled "reasonable." The pressures generated by the recently arrived and more militant civil rights spokesmen made acceptance of the school board's modest efforts to comply voluntarily with desegregation guidelines infinitely more palatable to local segregationist sentiment. The school board's "voluntary compliance seemed a mild compromise indeed" when compared to the demands that were being articulated in the Delta by the new radicals. The point

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simply is that even in the intransigent Mississippi Delta increased pressure by civil rights spokesmen evoked some concessions.

In other cases in the Mack volume as in Riverside, California and the Mississippi Delta, change occurred only after civil rights groups exerted overt pressure. For example, John Pease in his chapter "Desegregation in the Midwest: The Case of Kalamazoo" states that

> . . . the changes which have occurred in Kalamazoo in employment patterns and in housing have come about as the result of overt acts (picketing and filing of complaints) by members of the Negro community. Until these pressures were brought, the whites had gone on for years believing that "our" Negroes were well treated and had no major complaints. The uproar arising from Negro demands illustrates how complacent the white community has been.
>
> Gradual change is taking place in Kalamazoo race relations—too much change to suit a few, too little change and too slowly to satisfy others. Change will undoubtedly continue to occur, and its rate will be heightened by the increasing activity and more efficient organization of the Negro community. . . .

This description by Pease of the current status of race relations in a small Midwestern city might apply to dozens of communities throughout the nation. It reflects several salient facts-of-life concerning race relations in the United States. The minority groups will never again be docile and acquiescent. As Anthony Dworkin affirms in "No Siesta Mañana: The Mexican American in Los Angeles," the dynamics of the civil rights movement has unshackled the once silent, deferential, and subservient minority groups of the nation's ghettos. Minority communities have now seen the values to be derived from protest and are no longer fearful. As the Remsbergs illustrate in their chapter "Chicago Voices: Tales Told Out of School," this new militancy on the part of the disadvantaged has implications than transcend racial or ethnic lines. The poor Appalachian whites or hill people fleeing into cities like Chicago also will be protesting more loudly and clearly in the years ahead. According to statements made by Chicago teachers in the Remsbergs' chapter the "Appalachian children are horribly neglected." Teachers purportedly want "to avoid teaching them" and prefer even to "be in an inner-city Negro school."

This escalating tempo of overt action by disadvantaged groups has precipitated a pattern of protest in American life that will be difficult if not impossible to reverse. If protest does pay and indeed brings concessions one can expect no surcease in the employment of the strategy of militancy by minority groups. Mack in the final chapter discusses the

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sociology of revolution which "indicates that—contrary to the popular fiction that people rise up against their masters when they are too downtrodden to bear further oppression—a group is most amenable to revolution when its status has been improving. . . ."

In other words, as more concessions are gained by minority group militance demands will intensify and not abate. Minority groups currently recognize as never before that they must overcome their traditional apathy and be aggressive if they are to gain equality. The prognosis is thus for increased conflict as Negroes and other minority groups push their demands more bellicosely to gain greater access to the varied opportunities of the world's most affluent society. This projection for increased conflict is further reinforced by the ubiquity in American society of the conditions necessary for intergroup conflict. As Mack states:

> three conditions are necessary for intergroup conflict: the groups must be (1) in contact with each other, (2) in competition with each other, and (3) visible to each other. All three of these conditions will obtain in Negro-white relations in the United States in the coming years. The very conditions that define city life—crowding and rapid movement, for example—will throw the groups into a closer and more frequent contact than was customary when the Negro was a rural dweller. Every improvement within the status of the Negro throws him into more direct competition with the white. Visibility, contact, competition—all are intensified in the urban environment. . . .

This growth of direct competition between whites and Negroes when juxtaposed with the increased pressure for equality of educational opportunity that will be exerted by the latter in the years ahead has particular significance to the country's educational leadership. There seems to be little doubt that the schools are and will be smack in the eye of the racial hurricane which confronts the United States. School boards are almost by definition conservative institutions dedicated to preserving the status quo and transmitting the values of contemporary society to the young. School board members with some exceptions are relatively successful and prominent business and professional people in the community. Boards of education for the most part are composed of individuals who have achieved at least a modicum of economic and social prominence according to the accepted canons of established society. They have achieved some prominence by adhering to the norms of society and quite understandably see little reason to alter the basic patterns of life or the attitudes through which they have gained their success. The

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school administrators who are hired by the school boards and commonly serve at their pleasure are functionaries of the established system and likewise are not apt to initiate or support radical alterations in the status quo.

Thus, a conservative institution such as a public school system is almost irresistably placed on a collision course with the escalating militancy and rising expectations of disadvantaged minority groups. The latter have little stake and minimal vested interest in perpetuating the status quo. Educational officials, on the other hand, are committed to preserving the existing order.

The passive behavior of school boards vis-a-vis the school desegregation issue is thus hardly surprising. Whether one is discussing the actions of the Atlanta, Georgia; Newark, Delaware; or Hempstead, New York school boards, the behavior pattern is similar. Of prime importance to many boards of education as well as other governmental bodies is the suppression of overt conflict and the removal of publicly sensitive or controversial issues like school desegregation from public view. Rosalind Dworkin in her chapter "Segregation and Suburbia" notes that a:

> complex organization cannot function effectively while under the constant surveillance of many interest groups, nor can any complex organization, including a school board, yield to all demands, many of which conflict with each other. To attempt to do so would be organizational suicide. Rather, organizations must develop certain defense mechanisms whereby they can function in a semi-hostile environment. . . .

Dworkin in describing the Hempstead situation mentions two protective mechanisms that are utilized by many school boards as well as other governmental bodies in dealing with the racial issue. These mechanisms are "token concessions" and "secrecy." Dworkin points out that the latter is difficult to accomplish in a public enterprise like education. She feels, however, that professionalism, which runs so rampant in public education, served to detach the Hempstead schools somewhat from public scrutiny and control. Attempts also were made to reduce chances for possible racial conflict in Hempstead by efforts to remain "color-blind." Educational officials in Hempstead, as did other "passive" school leaders throughout the nation, maintained that they did not "keep records of any kind that would indicate that Hempstead is a bi-racial district."

The Hempstead Board of Education displayed a pattern of conduct on the racial question that did not differ from the behavior of thousands of other school systems. School boards, unless they are pressured externally by the federal government or other agencies outside the local

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community, generally will not initiate action on the volatile issue of school desegregation. As local agencies of government, they are much too vulnerable to community pressures and constraints. Most boards of education structured as they are cannot realistically be expected to initiate long-range, independent, and progressive policies on school desegregation. Boards of education appear to grant "token concessions" only as palliatives under the duress of overt protest or to ensure passage of budgets and bond issues.

As Negro expectations continue to rise, particularly in terms of demands for quality education, the pressures on the schools invariably will intensify. Conflict between the minority groups and educational officials is inevitable as civil rights spokesmen will continue to focus much of their attention upon the schools.

The case studies in the Mack volume, however, indicate that general governments in the communities studied also were not particularly responsive to civil rights pressures until there were overt threats of action that threatened to "rock the boat." It is reasonable to project that pressures on non-school governments will also intensify. General governments in many critical policy areas can do more to mitigate segregation than school districts. It is general governments and not school systems, for example, that have the political and economic wherewithal to provide equal employment and housing opportunities for minority groups.

School officials in urban areas where segregation abounds, however, are no longer able to divorce themselves from the issue of race. The widespread riots of the past few summers have precluded the reemergence of "color-blindness" as basic school policy. If nothing else, recent violence has indicated that race does engender special and very unique problems that cannot be ignored. These multi-faceted problems if they are to be ameliorated require concerted action on the educational, welfare, housing, and employment fronts. It may well be that what is needed in view of education's central importance and yet detached structural position is a reassessment of basic governmental arrangements. If the situation is to be mitigated in our ghettos it may be essential to close the chasm that currently divides school government from the political system. Many now believe that the desired improvements can be effectuated only if institutionalized linkages are created formally integrating the educational system and general government. Professor Robert H. Salisbury of Washington University in a thought provoking article "Schools and Politics in the Big City" in the summer, 1967 *Harvard*

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Education Review explores this issue which some feel will crystallize more clearly and significantly in the next few years. Many now believe that the handwriting is on the wall in terms of the expanded role which the urban school must play. The belief is expressed that either school systems voluntarily broaden their role vis-a-vis ameliorating ghetto conditions or face encroachments on their existing prerogatives by other agencies that employ a broader range of social as well as educational approaches to mitigating poverty and segregation. Despite protestations to the contrary by black nationalists and others, continuing pressures for integrated schools by many influential Negroes can be anticipated.

The schools will continue to be pivotal pawns in the struggle for integration. *The Coleman Report* and *Racial Isolation in the Public Schools* only serve to dramatize to many how imperative and urgent the goal of integration is. These studies and others document the limitations of the compensatory education efforts that have been undertaken thus far. Such efforts are viewed as futile, piecemeal measures; attempts only to counter immediate pressures and maintain the status quo. Minimal permissive transfer programs, Princeton type plans, and other such techniques are regarded as defensive manifestations of "tokenism"; mere palliatives to temporarily "take the heat off" the majority white society.

The short-range prognosis is not pleasant. We can look for intensified racial conflict. The schools will not be immune from this conflict. The issue of school desegregation in the years ahead will continue to manifest itself as more Negroes achieve middle-class status. The sociology of revolution augurs that this growing Negro middle class will push assertively for quality, integrated education. There is an instinctive fear on the part of many that all-Negro school systems and communities will never have the political power or be granted the resources to compete on equal terms with the majority white society.

Despite the negative short-term prognosis, there is some encouragement to be derived from the fact that integration will be more feasible as increasing numbers of Negroes achieve middle-class status. As Mack indicates:

> . . . social distance declines with increased socio-economic status. The higher a person's occupational prestige, or the higher his income, or the more formal education he has, the less likely he is to be an ardent segregationist, or to condone violence as a weapon in dominant-minority relations. Social distance is least where both Negro and white have low socio-economic status.

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> Given the constantly increasing educational attainment of our population, both Negro and white, our steadily rising level of living, and the fact that the cities are drawing as in-migrants the better-educated members of the Negro minority, it seems reasonable to predict a decrease in social distance between the races in the coming decades. Most of the rationalizations justifying our treatment of the Negro as a minority are descriptions of lower-class behavior: poverty, disease, ignorance, irresponsibility, poor property upkeep, and so on. Most American Negroes must, at the present time, be objectively rated as occupying a low socio-economic status. As more and more of them achieve the education, income, and behavioral prerequisites of middle-class "respectability," they will not automatically escape from their minority position, but the beliefs which justify keeping them at a caste-like distance will be greatly weakened.

Unfortunately, the approaches to integration that have been employed thus far are contrary to the preceding sociological findings. Most efforts to integrate schools have placed the burden for integration upon those whites in the poorest position to handle such a burden; lower income whites who are one step ahead of the rolling ghetto and who are most threatened socially and economically if Negroes are given greater residential, employment, and educational opportunities.

Thus, there is some reason for hope as well as pessimism in the years immediately ahead as the nation grapples with its congenital racial problem. The schools will be in the forefront of this struggle as quality education will be identified incessantly as the *sine qua non* of lasting progress. Educational officials not only will have to withstand continuing pressures by minority groups but also will be compelled to recognize that their once exclusive domain will become more open to others seeking to promote social improvement. Likewise, many educators will have to broaden their perspectives in the search for the many-pronged remedies that will have to be developed in concert with other officials bearing the challenging but difficult responsibility of improving life for America's neglected minority groups.

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