

U.S.

Was 'Brown v. Board' a Failure?

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A new study shows a steady but significant return of racial isolation to America's schools.



Students at Barnard Elementary School in Washington, D.C., one of the first schools to desegregate after *Brown*. (Library of Congress)

After half a century, America's efforts to end segregation seem to be winding down. In the years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, 755 school districts were under desegregation orders. A new Stanford study reports that as of 2009, that number had dropped to as few as 268.

The study is the first to take a comprehensive look at whether court-ordered busing successfully ended the legacy of Jim Crow in public education, and it suggests a mission that is far from accomplished. On average, those districts that stopped forcing schools to mix students by race have seen a gradual but steady--and significant--return of racial isolation, especially at the elementary level.

It's unclear what effect school "re-segregation" will have on minority achievement, though a large body of research suggests it certainly won't help efforts to improve test scores, graduation rates, and college entry levels for blacks and Hispanics, a growing

share of the U.S. population. But the retreat from desegregation also suggests the policy had significant flaws--problems current education reformers should pay attention to.

The hope behind desegregation was that it would bring together white and black children to learn with, and from, each other, and end the disparities that blacks suffered under legal segregation -hand-me-down textbooks, decrepit buildings, lower-paid teachers, and, of course, lagging achievement. In the three decades following *Brown v. Board of Education*, courts ordered districts to create elaborate student assignment plans--often dependent on forced busing--to mix black, Hispanic, and white students together in the same schools. Most school boards complied reluctantly, and parents in places like Boston reacted violently.

A few educators and parents began to see substantial benefits that changed their minds. "It was really hard to do, but we all came together and over the years it has paid off," said Carol Haddad, a long-time school board member in Louisville, Kentucky, one of the few districts that has maintained desegregated schools voluntarily despite the lifting of its court order. "We can give equal opportunities to all kids."

Indeed, during the height of desegregation in the 1970s and 80s, the achievement gap between black and white students narrowed at the most rapid rate ever recorded in the history of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the most reliable, long-term measure of student achievement in the U.S. Black graduation rates also rose at desegregated schools, research has found. War on Poverty programs and other efforts to improve life for black families were one factor. "There was a lot going on," said Sean Reardon, a Stanford sociologist and the study's lead author. "But clearly desegregation improved outcomes for blacks, and didn't harm them for whites."

Nevertheless, in most communities forced to try desegregation, the sacrifices weren't worth the benefits. Parents of all races complained about the hassle of busing and the loss of neighborhood schools, but for black families the burdens were often heavier: Their children tended to spend more time commuting, their own schools were closed to make desegregation more convenient for whites (and prevent their flight to the suburbs or private schools), and their teachers were fired when white and black schools were merged.

In the 1990s, a series of Supreme Court decisions made it much easier for school districts to get out from under court supervision. During that decade, school districts and groups of parents both went to court to fight desegregation orders. In a few cases, including in Louisville, the main parties fighting busing were black. "It's not surprising," said Michael Petrilli, author of *The Diverse Schools Dilemma* and executive vice president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a think tank that advocates for school choice. "These court orders are by and large unpopular with parents, both white and black."

In the last decade, the speed of re-segregation has accelerated. The Bush administration took a proactive role in pushing for the end of desegregation in more than 200 districts, the Stanford study found. The districts were picked seemingly at random--on average, they still had levels of segregation in their schools that were about the same as the districts that remained under orders. "It wasn't like in some places desegregation had done a great job and that's why they were released and in other places there was still work to be done," Reardon said.

The strongest blow came in 2007, when the Supreme Court handed down a ruling restricting the use of race in school assignments in those districts not under court order. But by then, priorities had shifted. Both Democrats and Republicans embraced new ideas for closing the achievement gap, including No Child Left Behind's testing regimes, charter schools, and a push to make teachers more accountable for their performance. However, these new ideas have yet to show the same impact that desegregation seemed to have on minority student outcomes. Since 1990, when schools began re-segregating in large numbers, black gains on NAEP have slowed.

The next question Reardon plans to look at is whether re-segregation led to a widening of the achievement gap. Whatever he finds, it's unlikely that desegregation--at least in its forced-busing form--will ever experience a resurgence. A new generation of reformers has begun looking for ways to create voluntarily integrated schools in order to harness the benefits of racial and other kinds of diversity. "For the people who care about integration, we need a new set of strategies," Petrilli said.

Perhaps just as importantly, the demise of desegregation offers lessons about what *not* to do in order to improve outcomes for minority children. In black communities, desegregation lost support when thousands of teachers and principals lost jobs, schools were closed, and people felt that they lost power over their schools. For the same reasons, some of the intended beneficiaries have not wholeheartedly embraced--and even protested--aspects of the current education reform movement.

As Fran Thomas, one black activist in Louisville, Kentucky, said of her decision to fight the district's desegregation system: "I can see why everybody was excited when the law came down that we were integrated. They thought this was utopia, and that everything was going to be all right. We got a new school. We got a swimming pool and trees. Everybody was happy and ecstatic. But they didn't know what the integration really meant--the harshness." Thomas says she stopped believing in the promises of desegregation when she saw "the destroying of schools under the name of education."

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