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Book Review

Dismantling Desegregation

Joseph Watras
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Readers are asked to review recently published or classic books in education and research. In his review of Dismantling Desegregation, Watras acknowledges the authors' contribution to the discussion of urban education but challenges their indirect approach to addressing abstract considerations underlying the complex issue of racial integration in schools and communities.

Orfield, G. & Eaton, S. E. (1996). *Dismantling desegregation: The quiet reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. New York: New Press. Pp. 424.

In 1993, the National School Boards Association issued a report from the Harvard Project on School Desegregation citing an increase in racial segregation. For example, from 1986 to 1991, the proportion of Black students attending schools with more than half minority students rose to the level that had existed before the U.S. Supreme Court's first busing decision in 1971. During the same period, the share of Black students in schools with 90-100 percent minority students rose.

Calling the trend the "quiet reversal" of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Gary Orfield, Susan E. Eaton, and the Harvard Project on School Desegregation build on the data they presented in 1992. Their new book, *Dismantling Desegregation*, is a series of eleven essays written by eight people. Orfield and Eaton wrote six of the chapters, and they revised the others to harmonize their structure, analysis, and conclusions. Some chapters are better written than others. Often, the same information appears in several places, and the book suffers from such editing problems as different dates cited for the same U.S. Supreme Court decision and misspelled words. Nonetheless, the arguments proceed logically.

Orfield begins with a description of the cases on which the U.S. Supreme Court built federal desegregation law. He claims the Detroit case, *Milliken v. Bradley*, was the first major blow against school desegregation. He contends that in *Milliken*, the Supreme Court restricted desegregation in the North by making it more difficult for a court to join suburban and urban districts. However, Orfield believes that the Supreme Court used three decisions to allow even Southern states to return to such segregative practices as neighborhood schools. The cases were: *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell* in 1991, *Freeman v. Pitts* in 1992, and finally *Missouri v. Jenkins*. Orfield says that these decisions require only that school officials claim that their policies will improve education.

In the next chapter, Orfield argues that efforts such as compensatory education to improve segregated schools recall *Plessy v. Ferguson's* inadequate standard of separate but equal. This occurs because courts have held that private decision making and economics may cause racial segregation. In such cases, segregation appears to be a normal state of affairs. The unfor-

tunate result is that blame for the failure of minority children in segregated schools falls on the children, their families, or the school teachers. But the teachers of segregated classes cannot easily create a curriculum that compensates for the students' deficiencies. More frequently, the teachers feel they must "water down" the curriculum. Citizens may blame urban school administrators, who are usually Black, for the low test scores of their students. As a result of public pressure, urban administrators lose their positions after an average of three years and rarely have time to carry out any reasonable reforms.

According to Orfield and Eaton, segregation is dangerous because racially integrated schools have better resources than segregated facilities. Further, students in racially integrated schools bring fewer problems to the buildings than do the students in segregated settings. As a result, despite efforts to make segregated schools effective, African American or Latino students who attend racially integrated schools have a better chance of finishing college than the same type of students with similar test scores from segregated high schools.

Some sociologists blame federal desegregation efforts for the rising tide of racial isolation. From 1972 to 1992, the enrollment of White students in public schools fell 14 percent while the number of Black students rose 3 percent and Latino enrollments soared 89 percent. Citing this trend, some sociologists contend that White students fled public schools to avoid busing. Orfield and Eaton disagree, however, because White enrollments in private schools fell over the same twenty-year period. For Orfield and Eaton, the causes of increasing segregation were more basic. First, from 1968 to 1986, the total number of white students fell sharply as birth rates dropped. Second, most White students attended suburban public schools rather than urban ones. Each year from 1985 until 1990, central cities lost 1.6 to 3.0 million residents while the surrounding suburbs gained 1.9 to 3.2 million persons. Most of the expansion in suburban communities was due to increased numbers of middle class and White residents. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, the presence or the absence of an urban school desegregation plan did not alter the migration. New York, Chicago, and Houston never had busing plans, yet the White population declined in those cities. Los Angeles had a limited busing plan for a few months. When the busing ended, White flight continued.

Despite these dismal findings, schools do not have to remain segregated. Orfield and Eaton believe that metropolitan

desegregation would provide urban minority students access to suburban schools with middle class students. Further, with metropolitan plans, people from an entire area may participate in the reform of public schools.

Next, Orfield examines four misconceptions that justify lifting a desegregation order, thus allowing a return to neighborhood schools and resegregation. The first misconception is the view that segregated classrooms can be effective with the proper administrative or instructional model. Anecdotal evidence for this view derives from such highly publicized success stories as Marva Collins or Jaime Escalante. However, segregated classrooms function worse than do integrated ones. A second misconception is that Whites will remain in a city or return to it if the courts lift a desegregation order. According to Orfield, this simply does not happen. A third misconception arises when school districts present themselves as free from discrimination. The increase in the number of Black administrators seemed to bolster this view. However, Black administrators cannot solve the systemic problems of city schools. Finally, officials often present a claim that costs will go down when desegregation mandates end. However, if popular innovations such as magnet schools persist, costs may actually increase.

Chapters five through ten present case studies of such cities as Norfolk, Virginia; Detroit, Michigan; Little Rock, Arkansas; Charlotte, North Carolina; Kansas City, Missouri; and Prince George's County, Maryland. These show the problems associated with monetary compensation for disadvantaged schools, with local control of schooling, and with magnet schools.

In the last substantive chapter, Orfield returns to discuss housing segregation. Although the Nixon and the Carter administrations considered some housing dispersal programs, Orfield contends that these programs ended before they could prove their utility. The Clinton administration has been unable to overcome congressional resistance to such intrusions in local affairs.

In his conclusion, Orfield offers several policy suggestions to make desegregation a step in the transformation of segregated institutions into integrated communities. These include asking lawyers and citizens' groups to represent the rights of minority children in courts. He calls for the careful monitoring, evaluation, and improvement of desegregation plans. Orfield asks the media to engage in careful analysis rather than to accept official statements uncontested. However, he acknowledges that accurate information is not readily available in part because neither the federal government nor private foundations offer to support research about racial desegregation. Finally, Orfield suggests that school officials and housing agencies work together to foster integration. One example of the way this could happen is to build neighborhood schools only in integrated neighborhoods.

In all, Orfield and Eaton seem to believe that good social science can help people reform society. As a result, they make a moral plea for desegregation without delving into abstract considerations. Unfortunately, I do not share their faith. I think

the moral or religious considerations of racial integration deserve much more direct attention. In general, from 1954 until 1963 the battle to racially integrate schools and society followed a legal route. For example, in Little Rock, Arkansas, the desegregation of Central High School was termed a question of state's rights. When Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed his disappointment with legal solutions, he encouraged people to resist evil without violence. However, this aim did not offer clear direction. People engaged in nonviolent marches to advance segregationist policies saying they wished to fight the evil they saw in court ordered racial integration.

Orfield and Eaton observe how the aims of multiculturalism and meritocracy can reinforce segregation. However, simply showing that something causes segregation will not convince people that they should live in integrated settings. Nor does it help to show that minorities suffer under racial segregation. For example, from 1964 to 1974, all sides in the controversy about racial desegregation claimed to be advancing human rights. Even social scientists could not straighten out these conflicting claims. More important, the federal government reinforced each type of claim at one time or another. Liberals asserted that Black children have a right to attend racially integrated schools, and the 1964 U.S. Civil Rights Act reinforced those views. Conservatives argued that children had a right to attend a neighborhood school, and the U.S. Congress tried to block court ordered busing. Black activists said that minority parents have the right to control their children's schools, and the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare offered Model Cities grants to develop such programs. In this light, it is possible to read *Milliken* as showing that the U.S. Supreme Court did not block desegregation as Orfield believes. The decision could reflect the unwillingness of the justices to reinforce anyone's rights. Instead, the justices chose to correct only illegal acts.

My bias is that if we are to have racial integration, people must think that it benefits the society as a whole and them in particular. On the other hand, Orfield and Eaton see policies as more important than philosophy. They point to Charlotte, North Carolina, as a city that voted out the plans of a superintendent to resegregate the schools. The authors contend that the 1971 court ordered busing convinced the community that desegregation and academic achievement went together. Subsequent conservative criticisms of busing weakened this faith but never destroyed it.

From such histories, Orfield and Eaton seem to believe that good information can convince people that there are a variety of potentially successful techniques to desegregate schools or communities. I think that most people know that those methods could work. Consequently, I feel that it is most important to express clearly and completely the reason for applying these strategies. Whichever perspective you hold, Orfield and Eaton's book is an important contribution to the discussion of urban education.