Where Do We Go From Here? Assessing the Limits and Possibilities of Education for Black People in the U.S., 70 Years after *Brown*

May 2024
A white paper written for the Spencer Foundation, the Learning Policy Institute, and the California Association of African-American Superintendents and Administrators

Joaquín M. S. Noguera
Loyola Marymount University

Pedro A. Noguera
University of Southern California

This year, 2024, marks the 70th Anniversary of the landmark court decision in education which sought to end legal segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*. At the time, the hope was that ending segregation would address the vast and deep inequities in educational resources by race that had long been the legacy of schooling in the United States. Getting to the *Brown* decision was a long, hard battle, fought by civil rights attorneys, but also by educators, social psychologists, and members of the Black community—parents and students. And yet, despite the hopes for resource equity and higher quality education for Black students, inequities by race still plague our education system, and the promises of *Brown* remain substantially unfulfilled.

This paper is a part of a series, titled *Brown* at 70: Reflections and The Road Forward. The series consists of nine papers by leading scholars of educational equity, and each takes an honest look at the progress since *Brown*, documenting the shifts over time on key aspects of education including segregation levels of schools across the country, achievement trends in relation to policies and practices over time, the diversity of the teaching force, access to resources, the role of Black scholars and community activism, and the relationship between democracy and education. Taken together, the set of papers offers both an historical look at the impacts of the *Brown* decision, and, importantly, also offers guidance for the road ahead—promising policies, practices, and directions for the schools we need.

The cover art for this series is a reproduction of the Jacob Lawrence painting from 1960, *The Library*, which depicts the library as a vibrant learning setting for Black community members, and signifies the important of reading, learning, and education in the Black tradition.

— **Na'ilah Suad Nasir, Spencer Foundation President**
Linda Darling-Hammond, Learning Policy Institute President

Citation: Noguera, J.M.S., & Noguera, P.A. (2024). *Where Do We Go From Here? Assessing the Limits and Possibilities of Education for Black People in the U.S., 70 Years after Brown*. Spencer Foundation, Learning Policy Institute, California Association of African-American Superintendents and Administrators.

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death. America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. There is nothing to prevent us from paying adequate wages to schoolteachers, social workers and other servants of the public to ensure that we have the best available personnel in these positions which are charged with the responsibility of guiding our future generations… There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war. There is nothing to keep us from remolding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood.

— **Martin Luther King Jr.**,
Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?

The profound question posed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. —Where do we go from here?—in the last book he published before his assassination aptly captures the critical moment facing Black people in America as they/we ponder possibilities for using education as a resource to advance prospects for better lives. Throughout most of our history in the US, Black people have viewed education as critical to freedom, prosperity, and justice (Anderson, 1988; King, 2006; Love, 2019; Williams, 2009). Despite this vision, educational opportunities for Black people that would advance our interests and improve our lives collectively have more often than not been out of reach. The question posed by King in 1967, one year before his assassination, is as important now as it was then.

As is true with so many other aspects of Black life in America, the history of Black experiences with education has been characterized by great hopes and expectations that have been met with unfulfilled promises. The recent US Supreme Court decision requiring institutions of higher education to eliminate all considerations of race in college admissions[1] is just the most recent example of a setback. Affirmative action was created in response to demands from the civil rights movement to end discrimination in all facets of life. While the policy proved to be weak in countering decades of structural barriers and did little to reduce systemic racial inequality in America (in fact, White women benefited more from the policies aimed at inclusion than any other demographic group) (Crenshaw, 2006; Wise, 1998), it did at least produce a generation of Black professionals—doctors, lawyers, teachers and others —who disproportionately served Black communities and interests. The Court's new decision effectively ends America's acknowledgment that racial barriers continue to limit access to quality educational opportunities, despite substantial evidence showing that such barriers remain formidable today, though they may no longer be buttressed by legal requirements and rationalizations.[2]

The irony of the most recent Supreme Court decision is that 70 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* we find ourselves with few if any legal remedies to challenge racial injustice in education. Schooling in America continues to be characterized by profound inequities in opportunity that correspond to race, class and geography, and as numerous studies have shown, disparities in educational opportunity inevitably reinforce disparities in other aspects of life (Apple, 2001; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Milner, 2021; Stiglitz, 2012).

---

[1] Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 600 U.S. 181 (2023).

[2] Throughout this paper we draw a distinction between de facto and de jure segregation. Today, de facto segregation is most likely to be perpetuated by racial patterns in housing that have been shaped by historic practices such as redlining and residential segregation. De jure segregation, which was once enforced by laws, is now outlawed.

In this paper we consider how race and racial inequality continue to shape the experience of Black students in schools and educational institutions throughout the US. We begin by exploring the legacy of *Brown* and its significance for schools today. From there we explore the nature of the racial barriers that continue to obstruct educational opportunity for millions of Black children, (although Black students are the focus of this paper, we recognize that not only Black children are affected by inequality in educational opportunities) using the case of Los Angeles to draw attention to the ways in which lack of opportunity within schools corresponds to lack of opportunity and hardship outside of school. Our goal is to draw lessons from schools that appear to serve Black students well, whether they are integrated or not, so that they can be applied in other schools. Beyond documenting challenges facing Black people in US schools in the third decade of the 21st century, we intend to use this paper to also explore King's critical question: Where *do* we go from here? As we assess prospects for ensuring equitable educational opportunities for Black people in the United States on the 70th anniversary of the historic *Brown* decision, we believe King's question is as pertinent now as it was in 1967. Throughout this paper we argue that even in the face of significant constraints created by the exploitative and exclusionary patterns of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000; Glaude, 2017), education will continue to be important to the future prospects of Black people in America. For this reason we conclude by describing some of the educational change strategies that are most likely to make it possible for King's dreams of justice to be fulfilled.

Reflections on the State of Schooling for Black People in the US 70 Years After *Brown*

Is integrated schooling in the United States a goal still worth pursuing? As we contemplate the significance of the 70th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, this basic question carries special pertinence. In theory, integration was pursued to disrupt centuries of legally protected racial hierarchy and provide greater opportunity for people of color. Thurgood Marshall and his allies at the NAACP conceived of integration as a means to expand educational opportunities, with perhaps some residual impact on the healing of an unhealthy society that was engaged in social struggle and transformation. Viewed through the lens of global politics, the issue has been framed as an opportunistic move concerned with global optics (Bell, 1980; Dudziak, 1988), and not simply an act of good will or a reflection of racial reckoning. Rucker Johnson (2011) and others have documented the fierce resistance to integration in most parts of the country (McRae, 2018). In fact, in some states, like California, the State Supreme Court acknowledged the need for desegregation in the state constitution, but little action followed to enforce and protect school integration policies (Orfield & Ee, 2014). Improving educational opportunities in this country has been central to Black peoples' struggle for humanity, dignity, and inclusion in the U.S. This connection must be recognized if we are to chart a viable path forward.

Today, all the evidence shows that even as American society is growing more racially and ethnically diverse (Frey, 2020), many of our schools are stunningly homogeneous with respect to the race and class composition of the students served. More importantly, the data also shows that in schools where low-income students are concentrated student achievement tends to be substantially lower than for more affluent students, (Reardon, 2016) and prospects for using education as a means to counter inequality appear dim (Chetty et al., 2017).

These are not new developments. After several years of progress in desegregating in the 1960s and 70s (Johnson, 2011), racially separate schooling has been growing. Moreover, despite rhetoric describing education as the most important civil rights issue of the 21st century espoused by many political leaders (Noguera and Syeed 2020), no leader or major party has devised a plan to counter the growing racial separation and inequality in schools in American society, nor have they even suggested that this is an issue the nation should be concerned about.

It is important to point out that the nation's lack of progress in creating integrated schools does not mean that the historic *Brown* decision should be regarded as a failure. Most legal scholars still cite *Brown* as ground-breaking and monumental because it established legal precedent for ending legally sanctioned racial discrimination in other aspects of public life, or what might fairly be regarded as "American apartheid" (Hacker, 2012; Wilkerson, 2020). The Supreme Court's unanimous ruling in *Brown* is credited not only with starting the process of eliminating racial barriers in education, but also with setting precedent for the elimination of racial barriers to voting, housing access, employment, transportation, and services in other facets of life (e.g. transportation, healthcare, etc.) in America that are essential to full citizenship (Grant-Thomas & Orfield, 2009).

Even as we acknowledge the importance of *Brown* in the struggle for racial justice, we must also acknowledge that its impact on public education has not lived up to the hope that it would produce equality in opportunity. Several studies on the race and class composition of schools in the US show that they continue to be characterized by a high degree of racial and socioeconomic isolation (Jung et al., 2011). This is the case particularly in the nation's largest metropolitan areas where the overwhelming majority of students are low-income and non-White (Porter, 2022). In large cities like New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and Miami close to 90% of students are Black, Latinx, or recent immigrants, and the overwhelming majority come from households that qualify for free and reduced-price lunch (Urban Institute 2023). It is important to note that the concentration of low-income children of color is also common to cities where Whites and Asian Americans make up the majority of residents, such as Denver, Seattle, Milwaukee and San Diego (Urban Institute 2023).

In the literature, the persistence of racially separate schooling has typically been explained by two factors: 1) court rulings after *Brown* that weakened the Supreme Court's ruling and undermined its ability to promote desegregation (Orfield & Lee, 2004), especially in the suburbs; and 2) initial rejection of integration through White flight, followed by the creation of new, more segregated school districts, and the continuation of pervasive segregation in residential areas throughout the US in urban, suburban and rural communities (Denton, 1996; EdBuild, 2019). While these factors are important to understanding the persistence of racially separate schooling in the US, it is also essential to acknowledge the role of persistent racism in America, and the way it influences parental choices about school attendance and neighborhood residence (Billingham & Hunt, 2016). Lack of civic and political will and passive acceptance of racially separate schooling (Noguera, 2003; Noguera & Wing, 2008) have all contributed to the lack of progress.

Today, the average Black student attends a school where the student population is 49% Black, even though Blacks comprise 12% of the US population. For Latinx students, the patterns are more extreme. 57% of Latinx students attend schools where the majority of students are Latinx (Orfield & Frankenburg, 2014; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018). On the whole, Black and Latinx students throughout the United States are likely to attend schools where the majority of children are poor and the resources available to serve them are often inadequate.

While the courts maintained oversight over desegregation efforts, segregation in schools declined significantly. When the courts terminated oversight, segregation in schools increased to new highs. At the height of school desegregation efforts in the 1980s, the achievement gap between Black and White students decreased by more than half in reading and nearly half in math (George & Darling-Hammond, 2019). The *Brown* decision was directed primarily at the 17 states that had laws mandating the segregation of Black people, even though they were not the only states with serious issues of racial discrimination in schooling. Ironically, though the South put up the fiercest resistance to desegregation, today it is the least segregated region in the nation (Orfield and Frankenberg, 2014).

In many parts of the country, children of color experience what might be termed "double segregation"—separation by race and class (Boschma & *Brown*stein, 2016). Typically, the poorest and most disadvantaged students are concentrated in urban, and some rural and suburban schools (Porter, 2022). Many of these schools have low patterns of student achievement and as a result they have been labeled as "failing" by state bureaucracies that theoretically are supposed to help them (Darling-Hammond, 2007). However, the "help" provided to such schools by state departments of education has typically consisted of threats, sanctions, and takeovers, none of which has brought about relief or improvement (Lipman, 2017).

It is widely known that many of the schools serving low-income students of color struggle in part because they are overwhelmed by the wide variety of problems that frequently afflict poor families and communities (including violence, homelessness, hunger, and trauma), and because they have trouble hiring and retaining highly qualified educators (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Nonetheless, education policymakers typically ignore and fail to address either these issues and the academic challenges that typically accompany them (Children's Defense Fund, 2017). Instead, under the guise of accountability, policy makers have sought to apply sanctions and a variety of punitive measures in an attempt to pressure schools to improve (Mintrop, 2013). Not only has this strategy failed, but segregation on the basis of race and class is no longer even acknowledged as an obstacle to educational advancement. As we show in the following section, the "accumulation of disadvantage" is a major obstacle to change.

Scholars and commentators, many of whom happen to be Black, have openly questioned the value and importance of racial integration in schools. In 1935, W. E. B. Du Bois questioned whether separate schools were needed in order for Black folks to receive a proper education. He argued that the outcomes will be healthier and more beneficial when Black children are "in schools where they are wanted, and where they are happy and inspired, than in . . . hells where they are ridiculed and hated." (Du Bois, 1935, p. 331). Scholars like Siddle Walker point to the benefits that prior generations experienced from attending schools staffed and led by Black educators who cared for their students, challenged them academically, and never doubted their competence or potential (Siddle Walker, 2000). Other scholars remind us that the Supreme Court's 1898 ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson—which called for schools to be "separate but equal"—was never realized. Prior to *Brown*, systemic discrimination and inadequate resource provisions relegated most Black children, and in many cases, Native American, Latinx, and Asian children, to inferior schools and profoundly unequal education experiences (Gamoran & An, 2016).

For 20 to 30 years after *Brown*, many communities across the country took *Brown*'s mandate seriously and attempted to integrate schools to undo the legacy of separate and unequal schools. In fact, both authors attended such schools in New York and California. However, many communities in the U.S. resisted attempts to integrate their schools. At this time, the evidence is clear: Not only have we failed to live up to the promise of *Brown*, but we have failed even to deliver on the unfulfilled promise of Plessy, that schools would be separate but equal. With few exceptions, poor children of color across the U.S. not only attend schools that are separated by race and class, but they are also most likely to be enrolled in schools that are profoundly unequal with respect to the educational opportunities they provide (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016).

The Accumulation of Disadvantage in LA County

Los Angeles County is the metropolitan area with the largest population in the United States. The 2,231 schools and 89 school districts in the county serve close to 1.3 million students (Ed Data, n.d.). Just over one million of the students served by schools in the county qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, almost 30,000 children are in foster care (Alliance for Children's Rights, 2020) and a 2023 census of the homeless population found that there were just over 6,200 children who were homeless (Los Angeles Almanac, 2023).

Black students comprise just under 9% of the national student population, a percentage that has been declining for the past 30 years. They are vastly overrepresented among those experiencing hardships, while in contrast they are underrepresented in schools that are regarded as "high performing" based on their academic outcomes. Existing data shows that they are overrepresented in schools with lower indicators on standardized assessments, graduation rates, and the availability and completion of courses needed for college (Noguera, P., Bishop, J. Howard, T & Johnson, S. 2019). They are also more likely to drop out of school, to be placed in special education, and to be among those who are subject to punitive forms of discipline in school (Swanson, S., 2022) Additionally, large number of Black students live in communities where their health and well-being are more likely to be adversely affected by environmental conditions. As a result, they are more likely than any other group to experience health conditions such as asthma, and less likely to have access to healthy food, parks and recreational facilities (Noguera, P., Bishop, J. Howard, T & Johnson, S. 2019).

The report *Beyond the Schoolhouse* (Noguera, P., Bishop, J. Howard, T & Johnson, S. 2019) sought to draw attention to the ways in which the problems experienced by Black children in school are compounded by the broad array of hardships that many of them face outside of school. When devising strategies to improve school performance and student outcomes, policy makers have typically ignored these connections. For example, Black students are more likely than any other group to experience homelessness, to be placed in foster care, or to be subjected to arrest, in school or outside of it (Noguera, P., Bishop, J. Howard, T & Johnson, S. 2019). However, even when policy makers have directed additional resources to support schools serving a disproportionate number of children in foster care or experiencing homelessness, they have refused to acknowledge or address the fact that Black children are more likely than any other group to be beset with these hardships.[3]

The report was very clear about the root cause of the problems facing many Black students in LA County. Rather than pointing the finger at educational or political leaders, the authors identified structural racism as the underlying cause of the myriad of challenges facing Black children and the schools they attend. Structural racism is different from interpersonal racism because it is rooted in the history of racial discrimination and oppression, and not dependent on the conduct or beliefs of racist individuals. We can see that in many cities and urban school districts, people of color hold positions of leadership, yet the legacy of structural racism often remains largely unchanged. Slavery, Jim Crow segregation in housing, redlining, systemic bias, and exclusion by local government and businesses are all features of structural racism (Edwards & Noguera, 2022; Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

What makes structural racism insidious and difficult to counter is that it has become normalized in the popular imagination and in discourse on the problems present in "slums and ghettos". For years, movies and television shows reinforced stereotypes that suggested "bad neighborhoods" were created by "bad" people; people who are lazy, criminally inclined, and substance abusers who make bad choices (Anderson, 1999; Wang, Yuen, W. 2019). Systemic disadvantages caused by redlining and racial discrimination are often overlooked, and structural racism and the continued disinvestment and marginalization of poor Black people remain largely unseen and therefore, unaddressed.

Similarly, schools where low-income Black and Latinx children are concentrated are assumed to "fail" because they have "bad" students who don't study enough, "bad" teachers who are ineffective, and "bad" parents who don't care (Noguera and Syeed, 2020). Like the neighborhoods where such schools tend to be located, failing the schools is assumed to be a byproduct of failures of the people who study, teach and send their children there, rather than systemic neglect. When such commonsense notions are unchallenged, policy makers are more likely to respond with threats, pressure and even school district takeovers, meted out under the guise of accountability, than to pursue policy remedies that would alleviate hardships.[4]

Unlike overt racism, which has increased in recent years with hate crimes on the rise, the problem of structural racism is complex, sometimes subtle, and for many, hard to grasp. However, if we acknowledge the ways in which structural racism shapes the challenges facing schools and communities that serve low-income Black people, we are more likely to devise strategies to counter the ongoing challenges it creates, or at the minimum to strategize how they can be mitigated. Without such an approach, most efforts at school reform will fail.

---

[3] The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) was enacted in 2013–14, to replace the previous K–12 finance system. LCFF required school districts and charter schools to report on the performance of students with disabilities, students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness, and English Learners, and supplemental funding was provided to support these groups. Black students were not identified as a subgroup warranting additional financial support. For more information see: Local Control Funding Formula Overview, CDE https://www.cde.ca.gov/fg/aa/lc/lcffoverview.asp

[4] A recent report by the Brookings Institute found that predominantly Black school districts were more likely to be subjected to state takeover. See "Do State Takeovers of School Districts Work" by Beth Schueler, Melissa Arnold Lyon, and Joshua Bleiberg, October 24, 2023.

In many schools that are ostensibly integrated, Black children remain tracked in non-college prep courses, and overrepresented among those subjected to punitive discipline and who are placed in special education (Ahram et al., 2011). Additionally, many of the schools located in racially segregated communities lack the resources and capacity to meet student needs. While hiring more teachers of color, changing the curriculum, adding new technology, or even creating community schools may, when implemented well, be helpful in alleviating some of the challenges facing schools in low-income Black communities and the students they serve, evidence shows they are unlikely to bring about improvement on a larger scale.

However, while doing research on the state of Black children in LA County, the authors decided to look at the data to identify the high schools in the county that were consistently producing the greatest number of Black students who qualified for admission to the *California State University* (CSU) and the *University of California* (UC). While the numbers were small, the overwhelming majority of the schools that were so identified were racially integrated schools where Black students comprised less than 10% of the student population (P. Noguera et al., 2019).

Interestingly, the school that sent the greatest number of Black students to the CSU and UC systems was King-Drew Health Science Magnet. This is a segregated school (de facto not de jure) located in Watts, a low-income Black and Latinx community. The authors were surprised by the finding. After all, the school is located in a poor, racially isolated neighborhood, and serves low-income students of color. However, closer examination of the school revealed several factors that helped to explain its relative success: 1) It had a selective admissions process which meant that students with greater academic needs were typically excluded; 2) It was well-resourced and able to offer a variety of electives, internships and advanced placement courses, like most suburban schools in affluent communities; and 3) it had a positive culture, 4) strong and stable leadership, a highly skilled teaching staff, and 5) substantial parental involvement. Incidentally, this list matches the "five essentials" that the Chicago Consortium on School Improvement identified as being associated with high performing schools (Bryk et al., 2010). While the researchers were pleased to have identified King-Drew after being overwhelmed by the dismal array of data on hardships they had collected, they were left wondering: why does LA and the state of California have only one such school in a low-income Black community?

So, Where *Do* We Go From Here?

Our attempt at answering Dr. King's profound question is layered. First, we answer it as Black educators who recognize that the educational aspirations of Black people continue to be obstructed by numerous political, social, and economic attacks and challenges. Contending with and finding a way to overcome these challenges is critical to the future of Black people in America. Since the days of slavery when it was illegal to educate Black people (Givens, 2021), large numbers of Black people have embraced education as a means to advance freedom and justice in American society. Those broad goals and aspirations remain relevant today. Much of our thinking about where we go with respect to direction of education policy and strategy, and what we should do to address the significant obstacles that obstruct our collective aspirations, is framed around recognition of both the limitations and the possibilities for change. In this final section, we offer recommendations specifically to Black educators, parents, and students, because at this moment in our history, figuring out how to advance the rights and interests of Black people in the United States is a challenge we cannot ignore or leave to others.

Second, it is important to acknowledge that Black people are not the only ones who have interests at stake in the struggle for educational justice. Race/class segregation and inequality affect the opportunities available to Latinx, Indigenous people, and many low-income White and Asian Americans. Acknowledging that we are not alone is important, because it means we potentially have comrades in this struggle whom we must work with to counter obstacles and advance opportunity. Moreover, as Rucker Johnson reminds us in his important book, Children of the Dream (2019), desegregation efforts were most successful when Black parents were supported actively by White allies and others. It is still the case today that building broad coalitions of support for educational justice will be important for avoiding marginalization and foiling attempts by powerful interests to dismiss our efforts as the concerns of fringe activists. There is power in numbers.

Third, to truly respond to the question "Where do we go from here?" we must remember that the struggles for human/civil rights and for educational opportunity have always been deeply intertwined and inextricably connected. Part of the reason we have seen so little progress in advancing racial equity in schools is because reform efforts have been led by academics, policy makers, and to a lesser degree, the courts. Educators, too, have often led this work. But on too many occasions social justice organizations, parents, and unions have been left out.

Policy makers from both parties have done little to advance racial equity in education. They pay lip service to the goal with catchy phrases like "Education is the civil rights issue of the 21st century," but such rhetoric or similar slogans that frequently accompany them have done little to produce change. Sixty years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson, who was a teacher on the US–Mexico border before he entered politics, connected school integration and civil rights directly. He made the case explicitly through various presidential orders that mandated civil rights and protections, and with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now called Title I) in 1965. However, since that time both Democrat and Republican politicians have pretended that we could simply talk about King's dream of creating a more equal society without addressing the deep and persistent racial inequities embedded within the structure of American society and its schools.

Race continues to play a profound role in shaping the character of education in the United States. This is particularly the case in urban schools, but it is common in rural and suburban schools as well. Despite the position taken by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, denying the persistence and presence of racial discrimination in education, and seventy years after the historic *Brown* decision, the legacy of educating students in racially separate and profoundly unequal schools endures. The persistence of deeply entrenched racial disparities in every aspect of life in America, particularly in educational and socioeconomic outcomes, provides the most poignant evidence that race cannot be ignored.

In order to make educational progress during a period of overt hostility to the rights of Black students, parents and educators, we must ask ourselves: What are the possibilities for advancing racial equity and educational opportunity in schools at this time? The answer to this question will vary depending on the social context. The example of King-Drew Health Magnet School in Watts shows that under the right conditions the constraints created by pervasive poverty and racial inequality can be mitigated. Yet we recognize that this does not mean that this can easily be done on a larger scale, especially given that King-Drew excludes students with the greatest needs. While we can learn from their model, school and district leaders must prioritize developing partnerships with outside organizations and service providers to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are met. Schools cannot do this work alone, and much can be accomplished when we know our people and reorganize our systems accordingly. In states and communities where hostility to the education of Black children has come into the open with bans on books by Black authors, curricula identified as Critical Race Theory, and diversity, equity and inclusion efforts (Pollock et al., 2022), figuring out what can be done to advance racial equity will require ingenuity and struggle, as well as legal challenges.

Both authors have extensive experience working on school change efforts in communities throughout the country. Our experiences have led us to believe that greater progress will not be achieved unless Black parents, students, community groups are involved in this work in a sustained way at the local level. It is too important to be left to consultants and academic researchers. Engagement can take the form of demanding more resources, such as A-G courses (these are the courses recognized by the University of California as meeting their requirements for eligibility), afterschool programs, laboratories, and computer labs, as the Community Coalition and Inner-City Struggle have done in Los Angeles (Noguera and Alicea, 2021). It can also involve policy efforts to push for the adoption of high-quality preschool, affordable housing and community schools designed to provide more support to students. This will necessarily require greater cooperation between cities, county governments, and school districts across the country (Noguera & Wells, 2011).

In order to counter structural racism it must be acknowledged that it is rooted in this nation's history of moral antipathy toward the plight of Black people, slavery, Jim Crow segregation, racial violence, redlining, and housing discrimination (Kendi, I. and Reynolds, J. 2020; Rothstein, 2017), we must devise strategies that bring broad coalitions together to demand racial justice and equity in education. We must pursue policy changes at the state and local level to direct resources on behalf of our most vulnerable children and avoid the divide-and-rule tactic of pitting Black and Latinx communities against each other, or against other minoritized peoples. Historically oppressed racial and ethnic groups continue to be subjected to various forms of pernicious and unrelenting discrimination and mistreatment that go beyond de facto segregation in schools, including the denial of language and cultural rights, the withholding of basic human rights (i.e. denial of access to healthy food, clean water and air, gender-appropriate bathrooms, adequate housing and healthcare, etc.), and of course the failure to provide critical educational opportunities (e.g. highly skilled teachers, well-equipped schools, college prep courses, etc.). By building broad coalitions for racial equity in schools, we will be in a better position to defend and advance the rights of the marginalized and disenfranchised.

We must not take the position that until schools are no longer segregated, or until capitalism ends and poverty is alleviated, change is not possible. We readily acknowledge that schools often reproduce the inequities present in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976); however; we also believe a great deal can be done to advance racial equity in schools even now. Over the course of U.S. history, individuals and groups have contested subjugation, resisted structural oppression, and fought to eliminate barriers to educational opportunity (Acuña, 1988; Warren, 2005). In fact, it was Oliver Brown's desire to challenge racial inequity that led to the class action lawsuit filed in federal court against the Topeka Board of Education. In his book *Faded Dreams* (1994), economist Martin Carnoy shows through a macrohistorical analysis of economic trends that the greatest strides in challenging and reducing racial inequality in education have been made during and immediately after periods when social movements were most active and successful in raising demands for change. School desegregation, affirmative action, need-based financial aid (Pell Grants), Head Start, free and reduced-price lunches (and breakfast), and a host of other reforms, all came into existence as a byproduct of the civil rights movements (Carnoy, 1994). While some of the advances brought about by these reforms have been reversed (e.g., school desegregation and affirmative action), others are now firmly entrenched and serve as the basis for continued expansion (e.g., from Head Start to universal preschool). We believe it is important for the next generation of activists to recognize that collective action made these changes in policy possible, and without it, reversals are not only possible but likely.

While it is important to recognize how social movements have countered racial inequality, it would be a mistake to conclude that until another large-scale movement emerges, change is impossible. In his book, *Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way*, Brian Schultz, a former teacher in Chicago, describes how a harmless civic activity he undertook to get his students involved in their school and community ended up producing a major political conflict and embarrassment for public officials (Schultz, 2018). When given the opportunity to name conditions in their schools and neighborhoods that they wanted to change, students generated a long list that included broken windows, rodents, lack of ventilation, old books, etc. They also pushed their teacher to allow them to present their concerns at a meeting of the Chicago School Board, and later at a press conference. Embarrassed by the public airing of the student's concerns, district and City officials promised to address them expeditiously. To their surprise and dismay, the officials soon found that the students would not be appeased by promises and continued to draw attention to the state of their school for a full year until corrective action was taken (Schultz, 2018).

Similarly, in recent years, teacher unions in urban school districts have expanded their demands beyond wage and benefit increases and become more outspoken about the woeful conditions that they and their students have long endured. They have begun raising these issues in labor negotiations, and in cities like Detroit, Chicago, Oakland, and Los Angeles, teachers have engaged in strikes and sickouts to call for lower class sizes, more counselors, social workers and nurses —to address non-academic issues that affect their students (Noguera, 2018). As teacher unions have drawn attention to structural and environmental conditions, their support from parents and students has grown.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that activists simply accept the nation's political and legal retreat from the promise of *Brown*. We have over one hundred years of evidence that segregated schools are almost always blatantly unequal. However, we also know that the *Brown* decision and efforts to racially integrate our nation's schools will not be sufficient to overcome the resistance of those who oppose racial integration, racial equity, or the destruction of the social and economic barriers created by structural racism. Our contention is that the way forward is through organizing and struggle, and the pursuit of racial justice in education must continue on multiple fronts at the local, state, and national level.

As we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the historic *Brown* decision, we have an opportunity to take stock of where we are on the journey toward racial justice in education, and ask ourselves: Where do we go from here? Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who posed the same question as he was organizing and planning the Poor People's March on Washington just months before his assassination in 1968, we believe that the only way to answer that question and to address the nation's lack of political will in supporting racial equality in education is through collective action. School and district leaders must not be afraid of such engagement.

Our communities possess deep knowledge of the needs of those we serve, and by working in partnership to build capacity, we can organize our schools to be community-responsive learning institutions. To do this, new systems and practices must be developed and utilized. Wherever we go from here, we should move forward with a clear understanding that Black students deserve to gain deeper knowledge and appreciation of themselves and their people through schooling, to possess accurate knowledge of history and our current context, and to have both the space for reimagining new futures and real opportunities to pursue them.

References

Ahram, R., Fergus, E., & Noguera, P. A. (2011). Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: Case studies of suburban school districts. *Teachers College Record 113*(19), 2233–2266.

Alliance for Children's Rights. (2020). *Who we serve.* https://allianceforchildrensrights.org/who-we-serve

Anderson Elijah. (1990). *Streetwise: Race, class, and change in an urban community.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Anderson, J. D. (1988). *The education of Blacks in the South*, 1860–1935. University of North Carolina Press.

Apple, M. W. (2001). Comparing neo-liberal projects and inequality in education. *Comparative education*, 37(4), 409–423.

Bell, D. A. Jr. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education* and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review, 93*(3), 518–533.

Billingham, C. M., & Hunt, M. O. (2016). School racial composition and parental choice: New evidence on the preferences of white parents in the United States. *Sociology of Education, 89*(2), 99–117.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2018). *Racism without racists: Colorblind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (5th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

Boschma, J., & Brownstein, R. (2016, February 28). The concentration of poverty in American schools. *The Atlantic.*

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (Vol. 4). Sage.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life*. Basic Books.

Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., Easton, J. Q. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.

Camera, L. (2017, November 3). New culprit in racial segregation? Private schools. *U.S News and World Report.* https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2017-11-03/new-culprit-in-school-segregation-private-schools

Carnoy, M. (1994). *Faded dreams: The politics and economics of race in America*. Cambridge University Press.

Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). The trouble with teacher turnover: How teacher attrition affects students and schools. *Education policy analysis archives, 27*(36).

Chetty, R., Grusky, D., Hell, M., Hendren, N., Manduca, R., & Narang, J. (2017). The fading American dream: Trends in absolute income mobility since 1940. *Science, 356*(6336), 398–406.

Children's Defense Fund. (2017). *The state of America's children*. Author.

Crenshaw, K. W. (2006). Framing affirmative action. *Michigan Law Review First Impressions, 105*, 123–135.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). Race, inequality and educational accountability: The irony of 'No Child Left Behind.' *Race Ethnicity and Education, 10*(3), 245–260.

Denton, N. A. (1996). The persistence of segregation: Links between residential segregation and school segregation. *Minnesota Law Review, 80*, 795–824.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1935). Does the Negro need separate schools?. *Journal of Negro Education*, 328–335.

Dudziak, M. L. (1988). Desegregation as a cold war imperative. *Stanford Law Review, 41*(1), 61–120.

Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (Eds.). (2011). *Whither opportunity?: Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances*. Russell Sage Foundation.

EdBuild. (2019). *Fractured: The breakdown of America's school districts: 2019 update.* Author. https://edbuild.org/content/fractured/fractured-full-report.pdf

Ed Data (n.d.) *County summary: Los Angeles County. Education Data Partnership.* http://www.ed-data.org/county/Los-Angeles

Edwards, E. J., & Noguera, P. (2022). Seeing our most vulnerable homeless students: The impact of systemic racism on the education of Black homeless youth in the United States. In H. Mahmoudi & R. Ray (Eds.), Systemic racism in America: *Sociological theory, education inequality, and social change* (pp. 112–138). Taylor & Francis.

Frey, W. (2020, July 1). *The nation is diversifying even faster than predicted, according to new census data.* Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted/

Gamoran, A. & An, B. (2016). Effects of school segregation and school resources in a changing policy context. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 38*(1), 43–64.

George, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). *The Federal role and school integration*. Learning Policy Institute.

Givens, J. R. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching*. Harvard University Press.

Glaude, E. S. Jr. (2017). *Democracy in black: How race still enslaves the American soul*. Crown.

Grant-Thomas, A., & Orfield, G., Eds. (2009). *Twenty-first century color lines*. Temple University Press.

Hacker, A. (2010). *Two nations: Black and White, separate, hostile, unequal.* Simon & Schuster.

Johnson, R. C. (2011). *Long-run impacts of school desegregation & school quality on adult attainments* (NBER Working Paper No. 16664). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w16664

Johnson, R. C. (2019). *Children of the dream: Why school integration works.* Basic Books.

Jung, M., Costa Vargas, J. H., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.). (2011). *State of White supremacy: Racism, governance and the United States.* Stanford University Press.

Kahlenberg, R. (2012- 2013). From all walks of life: New hope for school integration. American Educator, 36(4), 2–7, 10–14, 40.

Kendi, I. and Reynolds, J. (2020). *Stamped from the Beginning: Racism, Antiracism and You.* New York: Little Brown and Company.

King, J. E. (Ed.). (2006). *Black education: A transformative research and action agenda for the new century.* Routledge.

King, M. L. K., Jr. (1967). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or community?* Harper & Row.

Lipman, P. (2017). Economic crisis, accountability, and the state's coercive assault on public education in the USA. In B. Lingard, G. Rezai-Rashti, & W. Martino (Eds.), *Testing regimes, accountabilities and education policy* (pp. 29–45). Routledge.

Los Angeles Almanac. (2023). *Homelessness in Los Angeles County 2023.* http://www.laalmanac.com/social/so14.php

Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom.* Beacon Press.

McRae, E. G. (2018). *Mothers of massive resistance: White women and the politics of White supremacy*. Oxford University Press.

Milner, H. R. (2021). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Harvard Education Press.

Noguera, P. A. (2003). *City schools and the American dream: Reclaiming the promise of public education*. Teachers College Press.

Noguera, P. A. (2018). In pursuit of our common humanity: The role of education in overcoming the empathy gap and the crisis of connection. In Way N., Ali A., Gilligan C., Noguera P. (Eds.), *The Crisis of Connection: Roots, Consequences, and Solutions*. New York University Press.

Noguera, P. and Alicea, J. (2020). "Structural racism and the urban geography of education" in Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 102, Issue 3.

Noguera, P. A., Bishop, J. Howard, T., & Johnson, S. (2019). *Beyond the schoolhouse: Policy report*. Center for the Transformation of Schools, University of California–Los Angeles. https://transformschools.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/beyond-the-schoolhouse.pdf

Noguera, P. A., & Wells, L. (2011). The politics of school reform: A broader and bolder approach for Newark. *Berkeley Review of Education, 2*(1), 5–25.

Noguera, P. A., & Wing, J. Y. (Eds.). (2008). *Unfinished business: Closing the racial achievement gap in our schools*. John Wiley & Sons.

Noguera, P. and E. Syeed (2020). City Schools and the American Dream 2: Still Pursuing the Dream. New York: Teachers College Press.

Orfield, G., & Ee, J. (2014). *Segregating California's future: Inequality and its alternative 60 years after Brown v. Board of Education.* Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles. https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/segregating-california2019s-future-inequality-and-its-alternative-60-years-after-brown-v.-board-of-education/orfield-ee-segregating-california-future-brown-at.pdf

Orfield, G., & Lee, C. (2004). *Brown at 50: King's Dream or Plessy's Nightmare?* Civil Rights Project.

Pollock, M., Rogers, J., Kwako, A., Matschiner, A., Kendall, R., Bingener, C., Reece, E., Kennedy, B., & Howard, J. (2022). *The conflict campaign: Exploring local experiences of the campaign to ban "Critical Race Theory" in public K–12 education in the U.S., 2020–2021.* Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

Porter, H. (2022). *School segregation in US metro areas* [Report]. The Century Foundation. https://tcf.org/content/report/school-segregation-in-u-s-metro-areas/

Reardon, S. & Yun, J. (2003). Private schools and segregation. In R. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *Public school choice and private school vouchers* (pp. 71–79). Century Foundation Press.

Reardon, S. F. (2016). School segregation and racial academic achievement gaps. RSF: *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, 2*(5), 34–57.

Robinson, C. J. (2000). *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition.* University of North Carolina Press. Original work published in 1983.

Rothstein, R. (2017). *The color of law: A forgotten history of how our government segregated America*. Liveright Publishing.

Schueler, B, M.A. Lyon, and Bleiberg, J. *Do state takeovers of school districts work.* Washington, D.C. Brookings Institute. October 24, 2023.

Schultz, B. D. (2018). *Spectacular things happen along the way: Lessons from an urban classroom*. Teachers College Press.

Siddle Walker, V. (2000). *Their highest potential: An African American school community in the segregated south*. University of North Carolina Press.

Simon, N., & Johnson, S. M. (2015). Teacher turnover in high-poverty schools: What we know and can do. *Teachers College Record, 117*(3), 1–36.

Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). *The price of inequality: How today's divided society endangers our future*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Swanson, S. (2022). Student Achievement Disparities in California. Sacramento: California Policy Center.

Orfield, G., & Frankenburg, E. (2014). B*rown at 60: Great progress, a long retreat and an uncertain future*. The Civil Rights Project / Proyectos Derechos Civile. https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/brown-at-60-great-progress-a-long-retreat-and-an-uncertain-future

Urban Institute (2023). School Segregation is Prevalent in Suburbs; Not Just Between Cities and Suburbs. In Housing Matters, June 7th. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (2018, January). *Public education funding inequity in an era of increasing concentration of poverty and re-segregation* [Briefing report]. Author. https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2018/2018-01-10-Education-Inequity.pdf

U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2020, June 29). *Racial disparities in education and the role of government*. GAO Watchblog. https://www.gao.gov/blog/racial-disparities-education-and-role-government https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2018/2018-01-10-Education-Inequity.pdfhttps://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2018/2018-01-10-Education-Inequity.pdf

Wang, Yuen, N. (2019). "How racial stereotypes in popular media affect people: and what Hollywood can do to become more inclusive" in Race and Ethnicity, Media and Public Opinion, June 4th. Scholars Strategy Network.

Warren, M. (2005). Communities and schools: A new view of urban education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2), 133-173.

Wells, A., Fox, L. & Cordoba Cox, D. (2016). *How racially integrated schools and classrooms can benefit all students*. The Century Foundation.

Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House.

Williams, H. A. (2009). *Self-taught: African American education in slavery and freedom*. University of North Carolina Press.

Wise, T. (1998). Is sisterhood conditional? White women and the rollback of affirmative action. *NWSA Journal, 10*(23), 1–26.

Spencer Foundation
625 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 1600
Chicago, IL 60611

spencer.org

Jacob Lawrence 60

Front Cover Detail: Jacob Lawrence, *The Library*
Back Cover Painting: Jacob Lawrence, *The Library*

© 2024 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York