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DESEGREGATING SCHOOLS CAN HELP DESEGREGATE NEIGHBORHOODS

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by James W. Loewen

Status and segregation are tightly intertwined in American cities. In rural areas, a small farm or tenant house can coexist with a mansion or plantation. Everyone knows enough about everyone else to know who is rich and who is poor, and the social structure of patterned associations among school children mirrors the status inequality of their parents (cf. Coles, 1977). But in metropolitan areas, the symbols of status become more important, because each person has less information about others. Nor can parents be sure that their children will associate only with children of their friends. So those with social power express that power in part by affecting others: they exclude those whose racial or economic status is markedly lower than their own. Suburban developments with homes in narrow price ranges result, assuring that residents will associate only with persons of like status.

Within such a system, the family that remains in a neighborhood becoming significantly black or Hispanic or whose children attend a school becoming significantly black or significantly minority is asked, at least implicitly, "how come? Can't you do better?" Given the matrix of assumptions this residential pattern expresses, the parental obligation is to provide a "safe" environment, a "good" school, the "best" for the children, and a location expressing that the family does have the social power to live white. One moves to a "better" neighborhood or organizes to keep minorities out. Either action is segregative, by class as well as by race. Given these assumptions, it is easy to see why partial desegregation plans typically spur white withdrawal to areas where white children aren't bused or paired, or engender resistance from white areas singled out for desegregation while other parts of the metropolitan area get to stay white (Orfield, 1978, 143-150). For their part, black families hesitate to move to white areas distant from the black community, where their children will be a small minority of the school population, so their residential choices also keep the city segregated.

On both sides, there develops a we/they mentality. Bizarre preconceptions can build about those other parts of the metropolitan area where "they" live or which are integrated. And we move toward becoming two Americas, separate and suspicious. The problem appears intractable. It is hard to desegregate neighborhoods so long as white areas assure white schools, hard to desegregate schools so long as neighborhoods are segregated.

At the same time, whites in increasing proportions state that they favor desegregation of schools and neighborhoods. More than three fourths of Northern white parents say they would not object to sending their children to schools where half of the students were black

(AIPO, 1976, 9). Only 13% of whites nationwide would move if a black family moved next door, compared to 45% in 1963 (AIPO, 1978). What are we to make of these survey responses? Are they merely indicators of mass hypocrisy? Or do they indicate that both sides of the American dilemma described by Gunnar Myrdal long ago still exist -- the institutional discrimination and individual prejudice, on the one hand, and the good will and commitment to justice on the other? If so, perhaps school desegregation can tap this side of our national character. Then, just as segregated schools and segregated neighborhoods reinforce each other, so school desegregation perhaps can help cause residential desegregation, in turn leading to more school desegregation. A case study of one of America's most segregated cities indicates that this is a possibility.

In Jackson, Mississippi, prior to 1970, neighborhoods were overwhelmingly segregated. On a scale from 0 to 100 (Taeuber Index), with 0 indicating that all blocks have the same racial ratio while 100 indicates complete apartheid, larger American cities averaged 86.2 in 1960, while Jackson was still higher, at 94.2 (Taeuber and Taeuber, 1965, 32-7). 1970 statistics showed no significant change in either the nation (Sorensen, *et al.*, 1975) or Jackson (Loewen, 1977). As in other cities, North and South, black areas were bounded by nonresidential areas (industry, railroads), by stable black/white boundaries, and by a slowly changing (transitional neighborhood) outer edge. Areas noncontiguous to the black community stayed all-white; blacks rarely ventured to seek housing there, and realtors avoided showing them any. Schools had been totally segregated by law; token freedom-of-choice desegregation had made no real dent in the dual school pattern.

School desegregation was implemented in January, 1970. Busing, pairing, and thorough faculty reassignment constituted a plan to make most schools have about the same racial ratio as the system. Recognizing that to abandon public education would condemn Jackson to years of economic stagnation, the white establishment urged support for the schools. As a result, although many affluent white parents put their children in private schools, middle- and lower-income whites felt able to stay with the public schools, and school desegregation became a reality.

Because schools are important social institutions, the change in them immediately affected other institutions and the general ideology. Now it was OK for whites and blacks to ride together in autos; they might be co-teachers at the same school. White clubs and restaurants, already open to black groups, now hosted interracial faculty parties and dinners, formal and informal. Institutions that served students -- from museums to McDonalds -- grew accustomed to serving blacks and whites together. Even close associations developed: within a year fourteen interracial couples existed at Provine High School alone.

The effect upon real estate was equally profound. Black families began buying in certain residential areas previously considered white. They knew they would no longer be lone intruders there, at least not in the schools. School desegregation also helped familiarize them with white neighborhoods they previously had considered geographically and socially distant. Most important of all, blacks felt empowered by school desegregation.

Conversely, whites felt less efficacious. Some whites still wanted all-white neighborhoods, but they no longer felt they could achieve them. There was a sense of inevitability about desegregation, a sense that the courts, the federal executive, even perhaps the spirit of the nation, were allied with blacks in opposition to racial barriers. "I don't like it, but what can we do?" was frequently voiced. Realtors still tried ruses to steer blacks away from white areas, but with less determination than before.

There were other reasons for the residential desegregation. In a sense, less was at stake. Since white neighborhoods no longer assured white schools, to desegregate neighborhoods no longer threatened white schools -- they were already desegregated. And their de-

segregation had not radically altered society -- life went on much as before. Thus whites felt less "racial patriotism."

Whites also had less of a status-derived interest in opposing black residents. No individual neighborhood and school could now go all-black while others stayed proudly white. The distinction between a 75% black school and a 60% black school is marginal in terms of status differentiation, compared to the difference between a 60% black school and a 1% black school. Some whites now even saw reasons to favor interracial housing, for educators and wise parents knew that the only way to decrease busing and pairing for desegregation in the long run would be through the growth of residentially mixed areas.

More important than these direct interests, probably, was the general effect upon public rhetoric, probably the most sweeping single result of school desegregation in a community. When neighborhoods and schools are segregated and government condones it, the ideology of integration can be hard to voice, and actual integrative decisions by individual families can be even harder to make (See Stalvey, 1974, for a "grass-roots" description of this difficulty.). After a major institution desegregates, integrationism is easier to advocate. At neighborhood meetings to combat blockbusting, whites were able to say, some for the first time, that they thought desegregation was right. Those who proclaimed resistance were suddenly somehow on the defensive. Desegregation seemed to be an idea whose time was at hand.

With the breakdown of the ideology of resistance, we/they thinking also declined. Suddenly the fact that "their" children were two years behind in math mattered, because "they" weren't across town in "their" own schools, any more. Instead of pointing to the gap as a reason to avoid desegregation, now white parents realized that the children afflicted by it were with "our" children, whom they might be holding back. So there was a feeling that the schools needed to improve. Black students from nearby Tougaloo College, barred from practice teaching in Jackson since a library sit-in a decade before, were invited back, for educators realized their quality and their experience in dealing with whites as well as blacks might now be assets. Jackson had its first major curricular revision in 17 years in 1971. Individualized instruction, team teaching, and other innovations were tried, sometimes merely to be able to defend the system to white parents ("Johnnie doesn't have a black teacher, he has four teachers, and two of them are black", or "Suzy won't be held down by 'them'; her instruction is individualized."), but sometimes from a real concern for the educational needs of all members of a heterogeneous student body. And this decrease in racial polarization again helped decrease resistance to residential desegregation.

The 1980 Census will help tell whether the opening of new areas to black residents amounted merely to new sites for block-busting or whether stable interracial neighborhoods might result. Certainly even school desegregation itself is tenuous in a system where 70% of the students are black and there has been considerable white flight. A number of specific steps need to be taken to enhance the ways school and neighborhood desegregation can reinforce each other, in Jackson and elsewhere.

Some innovations are suggested by the Louisville (Ky.) desegregation experience. In Louisville and Jefferson County, families who live in neighborhoods where they are a small minority are exempted from busing. Black families who want neighborhood schools for their children have an added reason to move to white suburbs and have done so, often in areas distant from the black community. (Whites have not chosen to obtain this same relief from busing by moving to black neighborhoods.) Spurred by the Kentucky Commission on Human Relations, city/county school desegregation was accompanied by the merger of the city and county Section 8 housing offices. This action made suburban housing much more salient to black Louisville. The Commission produced a pamphlet, Six Ways to Avoid Bussing, which amounted to

six ways to achieve residential desegregation. And it undertook a campaign to familiarize black prospective homebuyers with white neighborhoods.

The program is working. "In just three years the number of black pupils residing outside the city of Louisville has increased more than in the entire twelve-year period [1961-73]" (KCHR, 1971, 1). And as the table indicates (modified from KCHR, 1971, 2), this increase "has not occurred in those suburban areas where blacks are already concentrated;" 86% of the new black suburbanites moved to areas where their children were exempted from busing because they lived in desegregated housing. White resistance to these moves was lessened by the fact that if a white neighborhood thus becomes as black as the district as a whole, the school can exempt it from busing altogether.

Table 1. Black Pupils' Residence in Segregated and Desegregated Areas of Suburban Jefferson County, 1974-77.

Location	1974	%	1977	%	Change, 1974-7	%
Segregated areas	2157	54	2506	39	349	14
Desegregated areas	1791	46	3945	61	2154	86
Totals	3948	100	6451	100	2503	100

Scattered results from other communities indicate that residential desegregation occasioned by school desegregation is not limited to Jackson and Louisville but has occurred or is occurring in Milwaukee (Taeuber, 1979, 166), Riverside (Green, 1974, 252), Denver (Braunscome, 1977), and elsewhere (Rossell, 1978, 29); Orfield, 1977, 51). Typically this desegregation is stable, because it is often of areas not adjacent to the black or Hispanic community; when such areas become interracial they tend to stay that way, rather than becoming all-minority (Johnston, 1972, 263).

What is happening in these cities may not happen everywhere. Nor can we expect full residential desegregation from school desegregation, for recent research indicates that most "white flight," including the continuing suburban movement of whites from Jackson, is caused by reasons other than race (Blakeslee, 1979). Thus, just as school desegregation is not a pervasive cause of white suburbanization, it cannot be much more than an opening wedge for residential desegregation, a wedge affecting social structure and its accompanying ideology. Other policies to support residential desegregation must come from HUD, lending institutions, local and regional planners, and others whose decisions affect the location of jobs, amenities, and public and private housing (cf. Levinsohn and Wright, 1976). The recent restructuring of the Justice Department, combining housing and education, may indicate that federal policymakers are realizing the interrelations between the two. If so, perhaps housing policies will change so that minority and majority families with integrationist values can find it easier and more acceptable to put them into practice.

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