

Tackling Racial Segregation One Policy at a Time: Why School Desegregation Only Went So Far¹

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This article provides an overview of the major findings from the “Understanding Race and Education Study,” a 5-year research project conducted by the authors at Teachers College–Columbia University and UCLA. The central theme to emerge from the 5-year historical case study of six racially diverse high schools and their graduates from the late 1970s was that school desegregation faced enormous political obstacles in local communities, which compromised its effect. At the same time, this fairly radical policy fundamentally changed the people who lived through it but had a more limited impact on the society as a whole. This article presents data from this study of 540 interviews and document collection from these six sites, which show that in the 1970s racially diverse public schools were challenged because educators either tried to or were forced to facilitate racial integration amid a society that remained segregated in terms of housing and other social institutions. This context compromised many of the goals of desegregation as politically powerful Whites resisted meaningful equality within desegregated schools and Blacks and Latinos were often angered and frustrated by this resistance. Nonetheless, desegregation made the vast majority of the students who attended these schools less racially prejudiced and more comfortable around people of different backgrounds. After high school, however,

their lives, mirroring the larger society, have been far more segregated. They lament that school desegregation was supposed to prepare them for the “real world,” but that world is far more segregated than their schools.

The 50th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* caused many in the United States to contemplate the value of public policies that flowed from that decision, especially the desegregation of public schools. Over the last half century, we have received mixed messages about whether such efforts were worth the trouble.

Hochschild and Scovronick (2003) argue that school desegregation was in many ways a successful public policy, as measured by various educational outcomes. Indeed, much of the social science research on school desegregation has been optimistic, showing mixed test score results but a positive trend toward higher African American student achievement during the peak years of desegregation, as well as long-term academic and professional gains for African American adults who had attended racially mixed schools (Grismer, Kirby, Berends, & Williamson, 1994; Schofield, 1995; Wells & Crain, 1994).

Despite these results, Hochschild and Scovronick (2003) note that, politically, school desegregation was a failure. Whites never strongly supported public policies that took away their freedom to choose where and with whom their children attend school. Meanwhile, many African Americans and Latinos have grown weary of the various ways in which White resistance to desegregation has manifest itself inside desegregated schools and districts, often making the goal of equal educational opportunity an illusive one (see Apple & Pedroni, 2005; Shujaa, 1996).

Somewhere between the educational outcome data and the politics of desegregation lies the complicated, and no doubt sometimes contradictory, story of the effect of this public policy on people’s lives. Missing from the research literature and the public discourse are the personal perspectives on school desegregation across different local contexts. Ideally, such perspectives would help to answer whether the efforts to desegregate the public schools were worthwhile.

Our study answers that question and others through the voices of 540 graduates, educators, advocates, and local policy makers who were directly involved in racially mixed public high schools in six different communities 25 years ago. We documented what these high schools were like in the late 1970s—some of the peak years of school desegregation implementation—and we interviewed 242 members of the class of 1980 from schools, trying to understand how they make sense of that experience today. We wanted to capture the stories of one of the first cohorts of students and educators to go through desegregated schools after the federal courts finally forced districts to desegregate in the late 1960s.

Our central finding is that school desegregation faced enormous political obstacles, which compromised its effect. At the same time, this fairly radical policy fundamentally changed the people who lived through it but had a more limited impact on the society as a whole. In other words, we found that racially diverse public schools were extremely challenged during the late 1970s because educators either tried to or were forced to facilitate racial integration amid a society that remained segregated in terms of housing, social institutions, and often employment. This context compromised many of the goals of desegregation as politically powerful Whites resisted meaningful equality within desegregated schools, and Blacks and Latinos were often angered and frustrated by this resistance. Nonetheless, desegregation made the vast majority of the students who attended these schools less racially prejudiced and more comfortable around people of different backgrounds. After high school, however, their lives have been far more segregated as they reentered a more racially divided society.

By documenting the experiences of those involved in school desegregation in the 1970s, we help readers understand the many ways in which the promise of *Brown* remained unfulfilled as White privilege was upheld within the context of these schools and communities. Such an analysis creates a context for the experiences of the graduates and explains why it is that desegregation had a profound impact on the students but a more limited impact on the society as a whole.

We also captured the extent to which the graduates of these schools highly value the opportunity they had to get to know people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds while they were in school. Virtually all graduates we interviewed said that desegregation was “worth it” and that they would do it again if they had the chance, and yet their current lives are far more segregated than their high schools were (also see Holme, Wells, & Revilla, 2005).

Thus, we argue that the school desegregation policies and efforts that existed in these schools were better than nothing, but simply not enough to change the larger society single-handedly. In this way, our study speaks to larger lessons about the role of schools in society and the futile but worthwhile efforts of lawyers and judges to use public schools as the main (and sometimes the only) tool for social change. The social and economic inequalities across color lines that had accumulated in the United States by the late 1970s—inequalities that are still severe today—reproduced themselves within these racially diverse schools, leaving some students with far fewer opportunities. In this way, the boundaries between the schools and their social and political context proved to be as porous as the will to change society through the schools. As a result, we argue that school desegregation should have occurred hand in hand with several other bold attempts to change segregation and racial inequality, especially in housing and employment.

Far from being a failure, therefore, school desegregation was never fully implemented, and thus, racial integration was never achieved. In this way, our study advances an important point made by John Hope Franklin in a profile about him and his work in *The New York Times Magazine*: “The real tragedy of contemporary race relations, Franklin notes, is not that integration failed but that it was barely tried” (Applebome, 1995, p. 34).

THE UNDERSTANDING RACE AND EDUCATION STUDY

In 1999, we set out to conduct in-depth case studies of six high schools within school districts that had undergone some form of desegregation by the late 1970s. Our study was designed to answer qualitative research questions about how members of the class of 1980 from these schools understood their school experience and its effect on their lives—their racial attitudes, educational and professional opportunities, personal relationships, and social networks. Furthermore, we wanted to know how the broader policy contexts of their schools shaped their experiences and understandings.

DATA COLLECTION

To answer these questions, we designed a three-tiered data collection strategy. Tier 1 consisted of the historical case studies of the six high schools; Tier 2 entailed interviews with graduates of the class of 1980 from each high school; and Tier 3 involved in-depth “portraits” of at least 4 of the graduates interviewed during Tier 2 from each high school.

Tier One: Historical Case Studies

The first tier of our data collection involved historical case studies of the high schools and their social and political contexts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These case studies were based in part on interviews with community members, lawyers, elected officials, and educators who were involved in these high schools at that time. In addition, we drew upon an array of important historical documents, such as school board minutes, newspaper articles, yearbooks, and legal documents, to help piece together the stories of what was happening in these six high schools.

Not only did the high schools we chose to study vary in terms of their geographic locations, but they also varied in terms of how and why they became racially diverse.² Some were in districts with court-ordered mandatory student reassignment; others were in districts with voluntary efforts to create diverse schools, including drawing students from across different neighborhoods; and in one case—Shaker Heights—the high school was

located in a community trying to stem White flight into the surrounding residential areas. Thus, the six high schools are:

Austin High School, Austin, Texas (Austin Independent School District)

- Desegregated via majority-to-minority transfers from several attendance areas.
- Racial makeup during the 1970s: 15% African American, 19% Hispanic, 66% White.

Dwight Morrow High School, Englewood, New Jersey (Englewood Public Schools)

- Desegregated by receiving White students from Englewood Cliffs High School via a sending-receiving plan. It was already somewhat integrated as the only public high school serving the racially diverse town of Englewood. Busing and reassignment began at the elementary level.
- Racial makeup during the 1970s: 57% African American, 7% Hispanic, 36% White.

John Muir High School, Pasadena, California (Pasadena Unified School District)

- Desegregated originally by drawing from several diverse attendance areas in the 1970s via mandatory busing.
- Racial makeup during the 1970s: 50% African American, 11% Hispanic, 34% White, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander.

Shaker Heights High School, Shaker Heights, Ohio (Shaker Heights City School District)

- Desegregated as the only high school in a district experiencing an influx of African American students from Cleveland. Efforts were made in Shaker Heights to integrate neighborhoods, and student reassignment began at the elementary level.
- Racial makeup during the 1970s: 39% “minority” (mostly African American), 61% White.

Topeka High School, Topeka, Kansas (501 School District)

- Desegregated via assigned attendance areas; student reassignment began at the elementary and junior high levels.
- Racial makeup during the 1970s: 20% African American, 8% Hispanic, 69% White, 1.4% American Indian, 1.4% Asian.

West Charlotte High School, Charlotte, North Carolina (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools)

- Desegregated via court order to reassign students from White high schools to this historically Black high school.
- Racial makeup during the 1970s: 50% African American, 50% White.

Tier Two: Interviews With Graduates

The second tier of data collection consisted of semistructured, in-depth, and open-ended interviews with a sample of about 40 1980 graduates from each of the six high schools. We chose to study the class of 1980 because these students entered kindergarten in the fall of 1967, when the federal government was on the verge of finally forcing hundreds of school districts to implement the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Thirteen years later, they would graduate from public schools that were, on average, far more desegregated than those they had entered. The late 1970s were some of the peak years in American school desegregation. Thus, members of the class of 1980 were, on average, more likely to have classmates of other races than were students in any class before them.

The class of 1980 graduates from each school were purposively sampled to reflect the range of diversity of the students in their class, particularly along the lines of race, ethnicity, social class, residential neighborhood, academic success, and level of involvement in the school (Table 1). We also made a concerted effort to interview graduates who had moved away, as well as a small numbers of nongraduates—those who either dropped out or transferred out of the schools before graduation.

Our interviews with the graduates elicited, as only qualitative research can, their understandings of how their lives were affected by their experiences in a racially diverse high school.

Tier Three: Portraits of Graduates

The third and final round of interviews involved a much more detailed and in-depth examination of the lives of four to six graduates from each site (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). Once we learned about the history and politics of the context of the high school and interviewed a broad range

Table 1. Graduate Interviews by Race

White	African American	Latino	Asian	Mixed Race	TOTAL
136	79	21	2	4	242+26 “portrait” interviews

of students from the class of 1980, we selected between four and six of these graduates who embody the major themes that were emerging from each site. They also reflect the racial diversity of the class of 1980 at their particular school.

Overview of Data and Analysis

We conducted a total of 540 interviews, between 80 and 100 per site. Each interview was fully transcribed and coded based on both within- and cross-case themes that emerged over the course of the study. Our ongoing analysis of these coded data, along with our review of historical documents, portrait transcripts, and field notes, allowed us to develop the outlines and a framework for our main findings. Quotes were taken from the corresponding sections of the coded data documents. Thus, each theme or sub-theme discussed in this and other papers from this study represents a large body of data—quotes from hundreds of interviews. The quotes cited in this chapter therefore portray a sentiment or understanding that is greater than each single utterance.

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: WHY SCHOOLS COULD NOT, ON THEIR OWN, FULFILL THE PROMISE OF *BROWN*

A central finding from our study, and one that helps us make sense of the experiences of the graduates of racially diverse schools, is that the public schools themselves could only achieve limited integration and racial equality in the midst of a segregated and unequal society. We have learned the myriad of ways that these schools were strongly affected by the fact that Whites—especially affluent Whites—in these communities had, in general, far more political clout than African Americans or Latinos, and thus far greater influence over how school desegregation policies were carried out.

In this way, the parallels between efforts to implement school desegregation and the efforts 100 years earlier to implement Reconstruction—another racial policy that was radical for its time—are quite interesting and revealing. Both were attempts to bring about greater racial equality, and both were resisted and marginalized by Whites who fought hard to maintain the status quo. At the same time, both made important inroads toward changing racial stratification, yet both ended—and were even reversed—before too much change could occur (see Du Bois, 2004).

In each of the six communities and schools in our study, officials and educators tried to make desegregation as palatable as possible for middle-class White parents and students. On a political level, this made perfect

sense; the idea was to stave off White and middle-class flight, which would leave the public schools politically and economically vulnerable. But the needs of students of color and the poor were too often ignored.

Interestingly enough, despite important social and political differences across these six communities, efforts to please White and more affluent parents manifested themselves in similar practices across these contexts. For example, more of the burden of desegregating the schools fell on Black and Latino children. They were the students most likely to be bused, and schools in their communities were the most likely to be closed down. This occurred to slightly different degrees depending on the size of the school district, but in five of the six districts, at least one historically Black school had been closed. Perhaps even more pervasive was the consistent resegregation of students across classrooms in desegregated high schools.

Because much of this ongoing inequality in how school desegregation policy was implemented has been documented by other scholars (see Adair, 1984; Bell, 1987; Fossey, 2003; Shujaa, 1996; Wells & Crain, 1997), an important goal of this study was to try to answer critical *why* questions. We learned that *in each of the distinct sites we studied, powerful White parents and citizens pressured policy makers and educators to assure that desegregation was implemented in a way that had as little effect as possible on the status quo*. In this way, the social and economic inequalities across color lines reproduced themselves within these racially diverse schools, proving that the boundaries between the schools and their social and political context were highly permeable (see Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, in press).

In other publications, we have documented many of the specific findings related to this first theme of our study: that the schools by themselves could not overcome the racial inequality in the society, and in fact, they too often perpetuated this inequality. Here we highlight the most salient subthemes from those publications and then focus on the second major theme and several findings unique to this article: how the graduates were and were not changed by what happened in these schools. Obviously, these two themes are tightly intertwined.

THE MANY MANIFESTATIONS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE IN RACIALLY MIXED SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

In a 2004 law review article, we described in detail just how the privilege of Whites manifest itself into specific policies and practices that to some extent undermined the goals of school desegregation in the six communities we studied (see Wells, Revilla, Holme, & Atanda, 2004b).

Across these six communities, therefore, we heard African American and Latino advocates, educators, parents, and students both acknowledge many gains from the efforts to desegregate public schools and voice clear disap-

pointment about how little progress had been made overall and about the price that communities of color had to pay when officials accommodated the demands of Whites. Below we highlight just a few of the more egregious manifestations of these demands and the political dynamics of race in these communities.

White Resistance and Threat of Flight: How the Burden of Busing Came to Fall on Black and Latino Students

Other writings on school desegregation have demonstrated that African American, and to a lesser extent, Latino, students have almost always borne the brunt of the burden of busing when students are reassigned for racial balance (Adair, 1984; Bell, 1987, 2004; Shujaa, 1996). We also know that in desegregating school districts across the country far more Black schools were closed down and Black teachers were fired—all in the name of an equity-minded policy (Adair, 1984). The same was true in the six school districts in our study. Yet what we came to better understand through our case studies was the racialized political process through which this came to be. In fact, in some settings, there was almost a self-righteousness in the way Whites made sense of their opposition to desegregation and their demands for unequal—meaning better for them—treatment.

For instance, in Pasadena, desegregation sparked a political backlash and protests on the part of many Whites in the district, who in turn elected a radically conservative school board. Meanwhile, there was dramatic White flight from the Pasadena public schools during the era we studied. New private schools cropped up, and White enrollment in the district, especially at Muir High School, plummeted. As a Muir High School math teacher who had been there for many years explained, “Pasadena is a Mecca for private schools.”

This resistance to school desegregation gave White parents and community members greater leverage in terms of *what* school desegregation would look like and whose lives would be disrupted by it. Thus, in five of the six school districts that we studied, at least one historically Black school was eventually closed, and in some of these districts, many Black schools were closed. Furthermore, in five of the six districts, Black students, parents, and activists felt that their communities bore the burden of achieving racial balance in the schools, and the reassignment policies support their claim (Wells et al., 2004b).

We learned from in-depth interviews that this burden was not simply a matter of inconvenience; rather, the closing of Black schools and thus forcing students of color to bear the brunt of busing dealt a blow to the pride and dignity within those communities. It was as if White society was saying

that there was nothing of value in the Black or Latino communities—nothing they wanted or needed (Wells et al., 2004b).

In Austin, Texas, as in several of the districts we studied, White students simply did not show up when they were reassigned to a historically Black high school. As a former Austin school board member explained, “We tried in Austin, as a result of the court extending the order, to say that all the kids had to get on the bus, not just the minority kids. . . . Well, of course as soon as the buses started running the other way, the big push was to dismantle the program of desegregation” (see Wells et al., in press).

When busing White students to the Black and Latino side of town did not work in Austin, the district tried using voluntary measures to desegregate the schools—more specifically, “majority to minority” transfer plans that allow students of any race to transfer from schools in which they were racially or ethnically in the majority into schools in which they were in the minority. But once again, the movement of students was unidirectional, with no White students transferring to schools in communities of color (see Wells et al., in press).

In Pasadena, the school desegregation plan paired Black and White elementary schools and assigned Black and White children from the two paired schools to one school for grades K–3 and the other for grades 4–6. Not coincidentally, the K–3 centers were always in the White parts of the district. And not only did the youngest students of color have to travel farthest in the early years, but also by fourth grade, but many White parents pulled their children out of the public schools instead of sending them to the historically Black schools across town (see Wells et al., in press).

Clearly, a strong argument could be made that such resistance on the part of Whites made sense, given the inferiority—in terms of facility, resources, and curriculum—of many of the historically Black and Latino schools. But efforts to desegregate such schools often came with district officials’ promise to upgrade these schools. The only school we studied in which such efforts actually worked and the White students eventually showed up and enrolled was West Charlotte High School, but this took place within the context of a school district that had already closed many other Black schools.

Similar school closings and reassignment patterns occurred in Englewood and Topeka, creating very unequal experiences across racial lines. And then, even at the end of the bus rides, students of color rarely found equal educational opportunities.

Same Schools, Different Classes

When the school desegregation policies succeeded in creating racially diverse schools, students of different racial backgrounds were regularly found

in different classrooms within the schools. In fact, we know from our research and other studies on so-called “second generation” school desegregation issues that one of the most common practices in racially mixed schools was (and often still is) the creation of more levels, or tracks, of classes (see, e.g., Mickelson, 2005; Oakes, 2005). The high-track or gifted classes were promoted simply as the classes in which the most advanced students could be challenged academically. But the racial overtones and implications cannot be ignored; in school after school, these top-level classes were almost entirely White (see Oakes & Wells, 1996).

The following quote from a White Topeka High graduate is typical: “I know my Spanish class and AP history and AP English, psychology [those were] predominately White kids. I don’t remember any Black kids in any of those classes. I took biology my sophomore year and I don’t remember any Black kids being in that class either.”

We recognize that many factors affected the resegregation of students within desegregated schools, such as the unequal schooling that Black and Latino students had received prior to desegregation and the higher poverty rates of their families. But our data suggest that the process of resegregation by track was more complicated. For instance, in some districts, students were labeled as “gifted” as early as kindergarten, then channeled through the grade levels in the “appropriate” classes. In one district, the elementary schools attended by most of the Black and Latino students did not offer such “gifted” programs, so these students had virtually no chance of being assigned to advanced classes by high school.

Meanwhile White students were regularly given more information about and easier access to honors, advanced placement (AP), and other advanced classes. A related issue was teacher recommendations and support to get White students but not Black or Latino students into the best classes (Wells et al., 2004b).

For instance, according to the Latino graduates of Austin High School, they did not know about the many upper-level classes available in their school at that time. As one Latina graduate who earned high grades in her lower-level classes noted, she was “never aware that there was maybe like an advanced, upper-level class for those that made A’s, and they were all predominantly White.” On reflection, she said she thinks the educators “kind of put those students all together; they were making all A’s, and they were going to go with a certain instructor, and all be in the same room, together” (Wells et al., 2004b, p. 115).

Whatever the method of sorting students that these schools and districts practiced, in all six settings, incredible and consistent levels of within-school segregation were the result. Students talked about “schools within schools” as White high-track students traveled from class to class together, sometimes spending their entire day with the same group of classmates. According to

one White graduate of Shaker Heights High School who was in the highest level classes, there were rarely more than two Black students in these classes. He noted then that the racial segregation across the five tracks in the school was “really pronounced” and that he “felt sorry for the Black kids” who were in those high-level classes because they were so isolated from other Black students and thrust into a group of high-achieving White students, many of whom took virtually all their classes together.

This resegregation process via tracking, or so-called ability grouping, was most egregious in the predominantly Black high schools of Dwight Morrow and John Muir and in the historically Black school of West Charlotte, which remained 50% Black after desegregation. In Dwight Morrow and Muir, both of which were only a little more than a third White in the late 1970s, graduates told us that there were rarely more than one or two Black students in the highest level classes. Furthermore, in West Charlotte High School, one of the teachers who had taught in the school before it became desegregated when the honors classes had been all Black, noted that she wondered where all those high-achieving Black students had gone once the White students showed up and filled the high-track classes.

Although we provide evidence of this within-school resegregation in several other publications (Wells et al., 2004a, 2004b, in press), it is worth reiterating here just how pervasive this tracking along racial lines was. Interestingly enough, a reform movement to “detrack” schools and create greater access to high-level curricula came along in the 1990s, well after the class of 1980 had graduated and after the schools in this country were already becoming more racially segregated (see Oakes, 2005; Oakes & Wells, 1996).

SEGREGATION OUTSIDE THE SCHOOLS AFFECTED MEANINGFUL INTEGRATION WITHIN

In spite of the obstacles to meaningful integration in racially mixed schools and the profound influence of White privilege on the design and scope of desegregation policies, the majority of the class of 1980 interviewees recalled becoming friends or at least acquaintances with one or more people of another racial group while in high school. These relationships developed primarily through extracurricular activities—athletics in particular, especially among the boys. But student government, drama, band, and chorus, for example, also brought boys and girls together across racial lines. Furthermore, in a few of the schools, as the class of 1980 neared graduation, racial barriers seemed to diminish (Wells et al., 2004a).

Still, it was the case at these schools that for the most part, social cliques were segregated along racial lines. According to the graduates, their very best friends—those they did things with outside of school—were almost

always the same race. Of course, there are many important social psychological theories regarding racial identity formation in students (see Tatum, 1997) that help to explain this phenomenon in diverse schools across the country. Our findings offered yet another important explanation: namely, that racial segregation, discrimination, and inequality in the local communities surrounding these schools perpetuated racial isolation in terms of friendships and social networks within the schools (see Wells et al., in press).

In other words, students who had grown up in racially segregated neighborhoods that were sometimes clear across town from each other, attending segregated churches and temples, and in many cases, enrolling in less diverse elementary and middle schools, arrived on their high school campuses with far less familiarity of students of other races and a much higher comfort level with their same-race friends.

For instance, a White Topeka High graduate, when asked about cross-racial friendships in high school, sounded conflicted when she contrasted her within-school and her out-of-school experiences:

I can't say that I ran around with a lot of Black kids but I did have [Black] friends at school and they were in different classes. I don't remember outside of school doing a lot of running around with kids from other races . . . it kind of went back to being with who you knew and stuff like that and where you grew up.

Layered on top of this were students' fears—and those of their parents—of the racialized “other” and the separate spaces in which those “others” lived (Low, 2004). This fear was especially powerful among the White graduates and even more so among their parents, who were reluctant to allow their children to attend parties or social events in the Black or Latino neighborhoods. For instance, a White West Charlotte graduate recalled that her parents probably would not have allowed her to go to a party in a Black neighborhood. “You know, they just would have said, ‘No, you can't come.’”

But the fear and the distrust was certainly not unidirectional; many graduates of color talked about not feeling welcome in White neighborhoods and homes. According to an African American graduate of Topeka High School who was popular and a star athlete at the school, outside of school, the White and Black students stuck to themselves because it was unusual for students—or anyone else—to cross the color lines. He said, “You didn't really go over to the white kids' house” (Wells et al., in press).

In addition, we learned that in several of the communities we studied, the special separation accompanied by a lack of mass transportation so typical across the United States added to the sense of distance and

separation across racial lines (Drier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004). A White West Charlotte graduate, in talking about how the students would “split up” racially outside of school, noted,

You had a big . . . geographic, mileage, radius of travel to get around because [the affluent White neighborhood] was pretty much located in the center, the center of the city, West Charlotte’s on the west side of town, and then the other group that was bused in, they were from the northeast side of town. So we were quite a distance away from one another.

Thus, we have learned that, for the most part, students in these desegregated schools only stepped over color lines when they were in school—if they did it there—and that outside of school, the racial apartheid of their communities continued to divide them. This iterative relationship between the schools and their local context is critical to understanding what school desegregation, as a policy that dramatically changed only one social institution, accomplished. It also begs the question of what could have been accomplished if school desegregation had been implemented simultaneously with more forceful social policies designed to tackle housing segregation, income inequality, and the need for more public transportation.

The following section of this article suggests that despite the larger social forces pushing against the success of school desegregation, the students who attended these racially mixed schools learned many valuable lessons. This second half of the story from our study suggests that school desegregation was better than nothing—and at some level, very important—but simply not enough to dismantle decades of racial inequality and segregation.

FOR THOSE WHO LIVED THROUGH SCHOOL DESEGREGATION: IT WAS WORTH IT, BUT IT ONLY TOOK US SO FAR

The nearly 250 graduates of desegregated high schools whom we interviewed told us a great deal about the meaning of school desegregation, both in terms of their life stories and in terms of the broader society. Three somewhat conflicting but powerful themes emerged from our analysis of that data: *It Wasn’t Perfect, but It Was Worth It*; *The Segregated Real World*; and *That Was a Different Time—The Challenge of Finding Diverse Schools Today*. These themes speak to the different phases of the graduates’ lives as they moved from their racially diverse high schools into adulthood and were forced to make important decisions about race and integration within a society that provided more incentives and support for segregation and the status quo.

IT WASN'T PERFECT, BUT IT WAS WORTH IT

Clearly, one of the most powerful themes to emerge from our interviews with the class of 1980 graduates was that, looking back as adults, they all valued their experiences in racially mixed schools more so than they realized when they were still in high school (see Holme et al., 2004, for more detail on this theme).

This theme cuts across racial and ethnic boundary lines and therefore is somewhat surprising in light of several of the issues we discussed in the prior section of this article and in other publications from this study. For instance, we learned that, in addition to the resegregation of students via classrooms, educators in these schools tried to ignore racial issues even as students were attempting to get along across racial lines. Thus, instead of allowing students to work through racial conflict or tensions, most of the educators promoted a “colorblind” perspective that denied the existence of race, both in the curriculum and in their interactions with students (see Revilla, Wells, & Holme, 2004).

Although these acts on the part of the adults in charge of the racially diverse high schools often frustrated the students—especially the students of color—more than 20 years later, as adult graduates, they note that overall, these acts did not overshadow the positive aspects of attending a racially diverse high school. Even those graduates, who, at the time they were in high school, found the experience challenging or were intimidated by students of other racial or ethnic backgrounds, in retrospect, they said that they had learned more about how to live in a diverse society than they would have learned in segregated schools.

Still, the ways that the graduates made sense of desegregation and how and why it was “worth it” differed somewhat across racial lines. White graduates tended to emphasize how their experiences in racially mixed high schools had made them more open-minded and more accepting of people of other racial/ethnic backgrounds than other White people they knew. As for the graduates of color, African American graduates in particular, noted that their experiences in racially mixed schools made them feel less intimidated by, fearful of, or subservient toward Whites (see Holme et al., 2004).

White Graduates of Racially Mixed Schools on Being Different From Other Whites

The vast majority of White graduates we interviewed noted that their experiences in racially mixed schools had made them “different” than “other” Whites—indeed, *most* Whites—who have not had as many opportunities to interact with people of other racial backgrounds. They compare themselves with their spouses, parents, siblings, friends, and acquaintances from col-

lege or work, and sometimes even their own children. They note that their desegregated school experiences came at such a critical and formative time in their lives that they believed that they would always be distinct from most White people who had more segregated school experiences (i.e., more open-minded and more accepting of people who are different).

Feeling more comfortable and less fearful. The White graduates from our study often recalled instances in which they felt far more comfortable than other White people in racially diverse or predominantly Black or Latino settings. It is the ease with which they enter a racially diverse setting and mingle with a mix of people that sets them apart from more sheltered Whites, they say.

Thus, quotes like the following from a White male Austin High School graduate are not at all unusual in our data: “Growing up in a racially integrated school I think was invaluable for me . . . it helped my people skills. It gave me the ability to relate to just about any person and feel good about [it] . . . I can’t put enough value on it.”

Similarly, a White woman who graduated from Dwight Morrow High School recalled growing up around African Americans and going to school with Black children since elementary school, unlike her husband, who was from a more rural and racially homogeneous community. She talked about taking her husband to her mother’s retirement party. The graduate’s mother, who had been a teacher in predominantly Black schools for many years, had many Black colleagues and friends. The Dwight Morrow graduate recalled how she and her husband had very different experiences at that party, which she described as “mostly Black” and included colleagues of her mother’s whom she had known most of her life. She talked about feeling very comfortable and at home in that setting, but her husband, who also had a good time, seemed surprised that the Black people he met were nice. She said, “I don’t remember his exact words but, ‘God, they were actually really nice’. . . . It was funny, but he doesn’t know any different than that, and he still has that mindset although he’s much more open-minded than his family” (see Holme et al., 2004).

This sense of being different from most Whites seemed to be especially pronounced in college, when White graduates of racially mixed schools entered what they described as a far more racially segregated world of higher education.

The other side of the coin of the White graduates’ greater comfort level in racially diverse settings was their diminished fear of the racialized “other” (Low, 2004). Thus, a very important way in which these graduates saw themselves as different from other Whites was that they tended to be less afraid of African Americans and other people of color. Although

Whites generally do not like to talk about their racialized fears, it is a well-known, if rarely spoken, phenomenon. White people are often scared of people of color, particularly African Americans, and the spouses and White friends of these graduates were frequently no exception to this rule. What is interesting is that the White graduates of racially mixed schools often were the exceptions (see Holme et al., 2004, for more detail on this issue).

One of the best examples of this finding from our data was a confession of a White Austin High School graduate married to a White woman who had attended private, nondiverse schools. This graduate once took his then-fiancée to the Texas Relays, a large track meet with a very racially diverse and predominantly Black crowd. He noted how he felt comfortable in that setting, but that his future wife was “hyperventilating” because, he argued, they were in a crowd of 20,000 people, and 75% were Black people. He said that he had to tell her, “We’re going to be all right. They’re not going to hurt us. They’re not going to knife us. They’re not going to kill us. They’re not going to rob us. We’re going to be okay. Just act nice and . . . and treat people the way you like to be treated and . . . and you’re going to be okay” (see Holme et al., 2004).

Understanding differences: Greater empathy and insight. Related to this lack of unfounded fear of people of color on the part of White graduates from racially diverse schools was another hopeful finding: The way in which some of the White graduates thought they stood apart from “other Whites”—those from segregated schools in particular—was in their more complete understanding of the different experiences that Whites and people of color have in a predominantly White society. This was certainly not true for every White graduate we interviewed, nor did this deeper understanding provide half the insight needed to bridge the yawning gap between the races on such issues. Still, in the voices of about a third of the White graduates, we found hope that White people can overcome the blinding and seemingly all-encompassing cloud of “Whiteness” to see racial power and privilege in a way that most Whites do not (Hale, 1999; Winant, 2004). And although neither we nor the graduates can say that attending a racially diverse high schools was the sole, or even the primary, reason for this insight, it is clear that their school experiences played a very important role in opening their eyes to other ways of seeing and knowing the world.

One example of such insight comes from a graduate of Dwight Morrow High School, who was one of the few White students on the softball team. She recalled traveling with the team to nearby predominantly White schools where students said negative things to her and other White students about

playing on a “Black team” and attending a “Black school.” She said, “I can’t even remember exactly what was said, but I do remember sort of there being some . . . you know, sort of ragging on us . . . [and] feeling some, you know, some sense of sort of discrimination, you know, against us for going to . . . Dwight Morrow.”

Despite such jeers from White students at other schools, this graduate said she really valued her softball team experience and wanted to win the trust and friendship of her Black teammates. She said she tried to prove to the Black students that “I wasn’t just this, you know, spoiled, you know, elitist, racist.”

This graduate was aware of the racial and social class divisions between the students at Dwight Morrow, and worked hard to bridge them, knowing that they were the result of greater inequalities. In fact, she said that being accepted and respected by her Black teammates was very important to her, and this aspect of her experience at Dwight Morrow was most valuable:

There was something really important to me, again, about sort of having been a part of that community and having, you know, sort of developed relationships that I might not have developed otherwise and . . . having more of a sensitivity to different people and different cultures and different life experiences and. . . I think that really made a very big impact on . . . the rest of my life.

It is this even brief glimpse of the world from another perspective that seems to set these graduates apart from so many Whites in the United States who are eager to discount issues of racial prejudice and discrimination. According to a White Topeka High School graduate, being exposed to different perspectives and points of view was the main life-shaping experience of attending a racially mixed school. He said, “I have never been pulled over [by the police] simply because I met a profile. But I have friends who have been pulled over because they matched a specific profile . . . those are issues that, you know, I wouldn’t be aware of if I went to a totally Caucasian school” (Holme et al., 2004, p. 11).

These themes of feeling more comfortable around people who are of different backgrounds and cultures and having a greater understanding of how and why the differences matter in our society were loud and clear in our data from many of the White graduates of desegregated schools. And the graduates were the ones who made the clear connection between their high school experiences and these themes in their adult lives. These testimonies speak to the importance of schools and schooling experiences in shaping racial views and understandings that last well into adulthood.

Graduates of Color Are Less Intimidated in a Predominantly White Society

The graduates of color from these six schools learned equally valuable lessons about comfort, fear, and empathy, but from very different standpoints. In the voices of these adults, particularly the African Americans, we heard how attending racially mixed schools had lessened the extent to which Whites and predominantly White settings intimidated them. They felt more confident in their abilities to succeed in a racially diverse but White-dominated society.

In fact, many of the graduates of color we interviewed said that going to a racially diverse high school taught them to not be afraid to talk to Whites or to compete with them intellectually. They also had a sense that this gave them an advantage over other African American or Latino adults who had attended more segregated schools and had little exposure to Whites.

For instance, one African American graduate of Topeka High School talked about his adult experiences in Dallas, Texas, where he has lived for nearly 20 years. He said that Topeka High School prepared him to deal with people of all racial backgrounds and that he is far less intimidated by Whites than the African American people he sees in Dallas are:

It was amazing to me how my perception of the way I thought some of the Black people here in the South dealt with White people. I thought they were very submissive, and it seemed like coming from Topeka High and being there and stuff like that, I had already overcome that barrier. . . . I think it [Topeka High] prepared me to learn how to not be afraid to talk to a White person.

Thus, there is a parallel here to the White graduates who talked about feeling more comfortable and at ease around people of different racial backgrounds after attending a racially mixed school. For instance, an African American graduate of West Charlotte High School noted that her years at this desegregated school did prepare her for “the way the world is today.” While she noted that U.S. society is now far more diverse than her Black and White high school, learning to get along with White students and teachers in high school was a first step. She said,

It did open my eyes . . . I know a lot of Black people have only been around Blacks and they really can't see past being around anyone other than Blacks. So, you know, I feel like that has helped me in a way that . . . that I was already comfortable enough being around a different racial group to now, when there are so many different racial groups that I'm around on a daily basis, it doesn't bother me at all. (see Holme et al., 2004)

And yet the issues of “comfort” and “ease” for the graduates of color are somewhat different given their different locations in the racial hierarchy of U.S. society. This means that not only were they learning to feel more comfortable around people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, but also that they were learning to deal with prejudice and cope with discrimination in ways they could not in all-Black or all-Latino schools. Furthermore, many of these graduates of color said they learned that not all Whites are prejudiced—at least not to the same degree—and that that helped them deal with the more “ignorant” Whites.

As one African American graduate of Shaker Heights High School noted, she was far more prepared for the “ignorance of college” because she understood from her high school experience that not everyone is ignorant. She said that knowing Whites who were not prejudiced or ignorant gave her more confidence and the ability to deal with the racial discrimination she *did* deal with in college. “So, I think having friends that were not African-American probably prepared me for, you know, the ignorance that I had to deal with” (see Holme et al., 2004).

The themes and quotes presented here are but the tip a large iceberg of data on these issues, data that clearly show that attending a racially mixed school was “worth it” for graduates of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although their reasons for valuing this experience differ somewhat across racial lines and even across sites and individuals, there is no doubt that the fond memories and sense of accomplishment that these graduates speak to, even more than 20 years after leaving high school, have been underestimated in the literature on school desegregation. The fact that these themes are so powerful in our data provides further support for the argument that these testimonies of graduates of racially mixed schools should not be underestimated in current policy debates about the legacy of *Brown* and the short- and long-term effects of the growing racial segregation in American public schools.

THE SEGREGATED “REAL WORLD”

Despite the high value that the graduates placed on their desegregated high school experiences, one of the most important findings from our study was the contrast between the schools that these students attended and the very segregated society that they encountered when they left high school. Occasionally, a graduate would point out the irony in this finding—namely, that desegregated schools back in the 1970s were supposed to prepare students for the “real world,” but their adult worlds are, in general, far more segregated than their high schools were.

This contrast, which the graduates could only fully appreciate long after they had left high school, helped to explain why most of them began to lead more segregated lives as adults. Thus, even though they said that their school experience helped them understand and interact with people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, this has not always translated into these graduates leading more integrated adult lives in terms of where they live, work, and attend church or temple, or what their adult social networks look like.

In many ways, these findings speak to an important issue—namely, how much and how little schools could be expected to accomplish in the context of a highly segregated and unequal society. The following section presents some of our analysis regarding the segregated adult lives of the graduates of these six high schools. Our interview data suggest that, for the most part, graduates of all racial backgrounds entered more segregated worlds after high school. This path toward a more segregated adulthood, although not consistent across every interview and more pervasive for Whites than for graduates of color, usually began immediately after high school graduation and was especially pronounced for those who went on to college.

Segregated College Campuses

Although most predominantly White college campuses were somewhat diverse by the early 1980s, what struck the graduates we interviewed who had attended college was the highly pronounced segregation within those campuses; virtually all their college classmates gravitated toward same-race friendships, activities, and housing. As we noted above, many of these college-educated graduates remarked how shocked they were to encounter so many of their college peers—of all races—who seemed to have had very little experience interacting with or engaging people of other racial backgrounds.

As one White graduate of Dwight Morrow explained, during his years at a predominantly Black high school, he and his White classmates were temporarily “taken off our paths as mainstream White kids for a short period of time.” Yet he noted that “once we were ejected back into college, we continued on that same path. So we just merged with kids that had gone to the private schools or the parochial schools or came from public schools that were all White and privileged.”

Nearly every White graduate we interviewed who had gone to college commented on how segregated their predominantly White college campuses were and how surprised they were to meet White students who had such little exposure to people of color. As one White male who graduated from Shaker Heights High School recalled of his experience at a large urban and selective university,

I remember going to college and what I was expecting to be a very cosmopolitan and sophisticated, you know, place of higher education, which it was in many ways, and meeting, you know, my White classmates who had never gone to school with any Black people, you know. And likewise my Black classmates who'd, by and large, had not gone to school with any White people, or else had been, you know, like the one Black guy at, you know, Andover, or something . . . all my White classmates at [the university] . . . no one had been to school with Black people, you know, or they'd gone to, you know, Dalton or some place and had like two Black guys playing basketball on scholarship.

More specifically, the graduates talked about segregated campus housing where, in some instances, the vast majority of students of color lived in one or two dorms that were physically separated from the predominantly White dorms. An African American graduate of West Charlotte High School recalled that her relationship with a White male classmate from high school who attended the same university was severed in college because of racial tension and the degree of racial segregation on campus. She explained although she and this White high school classmate, John, had been "very, very close" in high school, this closeness was hard to maintain in college, where these two West Charlotte graduates lived in separate racially distinct dorms.

This Black West Charlotte graduate noted that Blacks were such a minority on campus—only about 300 students out of more than 4,000—and they were angry because they felt marginalized and discriminated against. Thus, she said, the African American students tended to stick together. As a result of this somewhat hostile and segregated context, when she and John tried to maintain their close relationship, "some of the African American guys on campus did not like that. And so when John visited me one night, they were very rude to him, and every time we tried to get together, it was a problem."

Meanwhile, most of the college classes, particularly introductory courses taught in large lecture halls, were often more diverse than their high-tracked high school classes had been. Yet in the social realm of the college experience, especially the extracurricular activities that had brought students together across racial lines in high school, the colleges were generally more segregated. The Greek fraternities and sororities in particular added yet another degree of separation across racial lines. A White Austin High School graduate noted, "[I] hung-out more with my fraternity, which was 99% White, and we had a couple of Hispanics."

Time and time again, whether it was interviews with African American, Latino, or White graduates from these six high schools, we heard how racially segregated and separated students were on their college campuses and what a sharp contrast this was to their high school experiences. Given

what we know about the extent of resegregation in the six schools, this suggests that the college campuses were organized around a fairly extreme form of racial segregation.

A typical statement from White graduates we interviewed who went on to college was similar to what this Dwight Morrow graduate noted when she contrasted her high school to her college experience: “Mostly, I would say that in college that it was mostly White friends. I really didn’t see very many Black people at all in college.”

Segregated Adult Lives

In addition to leading fairly segregated lives in college, today, many of the graduates indicated that they mostly live in racially segregated neighborhoods, do not have many close friends from different racial backgrounds, and attend very segregated churches or temples. Furthermore, for many of these graduates, their workplaces tend to be the most racially diverse settings they encounter regularly in their adult lives, yet in these settings, stratification along racial lines is often severe.

In fact, one of the strongest findings from this study is that the current highly segregated housing market in this country has led to a situation in which the vast majority of the graduates from these six schools live in areas where they do not come into contact with people of different racial groups often. As adults in their early 40s, many class of 1980 graduates, especially the White graduates, find themselves leading racially segregated lives for the most part. Thus, even when the graduates of the six schools have sought more racially diverse environments—truer for the men and women of color than for Whites—options have been few. Racial segregation proved more powerful than the good intentions of this cohort of graduates, many of whom carried high hopes that their adult lives would be more like their high schools.

Three-fourths of the Whites we interviewed described their current neighborhoods as predominantly White. Only about 25% lived in communities that they considered to be diverse or in which they were the minority.

Meanwhile, 56% of the African Americans and about two thirds of the Latinos said that they lived in neighborhoods that were either racially diverse or predominantly White. But about 20% of the African Americans living in diverse communities said that their White neighbors were moving out and their neighborhoods were becoming more segregated.

These numbers suggest that although these graduates of desegregated schools are not more segregated than the rest of the society—indeed, overall they are more likely to be living in diverse neighborhoods than the average Americans, particularly the African American and Latino graduates—but they find themselves in a housing market with limited choices of

diverse and stable communities. The 2000 census data show that, even as the country becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, residential segregation, especially among Whites, remains high (see Logan, 2001).

Meanwhile, White graduates of desegregated schools have strong economic incentives to not change the status quo and seek out less diverse neighborhoods, even as they voice frustration about how racially segregated their adult lives are. Indeed, racially segregated housing has affected property values in a way that strongly benefits Whites and disadvantages people of color (Drier et al., 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993).

Thus, the neighborhoods of these graduates are, on average, far more segregated than their high schools were two decades ago. Perhaps the one site where this finding is exceptionally pronounced is Englewood, New Jersey, where many of the Dwight Morrow High School graduates we interviewed commented on the contrast between their high school experiences and their lives in segregated communities today. As one White graduate of Dwight Morrow High School noted, his current neighborhood in a very exclusive suburban section of the state and has absolutely no racial diversity—just “different shades of white.”

In other contexts, any “non-White” residents in these predominantly White communities where the White graduates live are not African American or Latino, but Asian. For instance, another White alumnus of Dwight Morrow who now lives in a very affluent New Jersey suburb said that although there are many Asians in this predominantly White area, there are virtually no Blacks—“There’s no community that looks like my fifth-grade class,” he said. When asked why he had not stayed in contact with any of his Black friends from high school, he said, “I think I went off with my White world, and . . . people live lives for the most part along color [lines].”

This graduate compared his adult life with the days when he was close to many of his Black classmates:

We went to school with each other . . . we got along nice, we all threw our hats up together, and then we don’t talk [to] or see each other anymore. So I think we failed. . . . We didn’t make the world an integrated place, it’s just not. They forced people to go to school together, but they don’t force you to live together, so other than that—the races, where do they commingle? Tell me.

Many of the White graduates we interviewed expressed this same sense of loss when discussing their current, more segregated lives, not just in terms of where they live, but also with whom they socialize and work. One graduate of West Charlotte explained, after some reflection on her answers to questions about her adult life and how little contact she had with people of other races, “I need more color in my life.”

In fact, even for those graduates (more often men and women of color than White) who have sought and found housing in integrated neighborhoods, their social circles, including their churches, and most of their close friends tend to be of the same race. As an African American graduate of Topeka High School noted, even though he lives in a predominantly White neighborhood and works in a predominantly White office, he spends most of his free time with his family and people from his predominantly African American church, where he runs a youth group. He talked about his White neighbors, some of whom will not even wave to him when they drive past, and others who act very friendly but never follow through with promises to have his family over for barbecues. He noted, “Never . . . been to the barbecue yet. And . . . we’ve been here since 1997. Haven’t been to a barbecue yet.”

We learned that the graduates were most likely to interact with members of other racial and ethnic groups at work. But even there, people of color are more likely to be in subservient roles, and Whites are more likely to be in leadership or management positions. That dynamic mirrors the tracking in desegregated high schools and challenges meaningful cross-racial interactions on equal terms.

These findings speak to the pervasiveness of racial segregation and inequality in the society that these graduates entered when they left their high schools. It also suggests that although school desegregation could affect the “hearts and minds” of the students who lived through it, these graduates of desegregation entered a society in which the racial status quo was entrenched and in which White graduates would, on average, benefit far more than their fellow graduates of color.

THAT WAS A DIFFERENT TIME: SCHOOL CHOICES FOR THEIR OWN CHILDREN

Meanwhile, findings related to where the graduates send their own children to school speak directly to the contrast between the current social, political, and economic context and that of 25 years ago. Mostly gone are the days when political leaders focused on equity, equal educational opportunities, and racial harmony. The current political climate stresses accountability and high-stakes testing.

The graduates discuss the political and social differences between then and now and how the focus today is much more on individual gains and less on changing society for the better. A White alumna of West Charlotte said, “Things seem a lot more materialistic to me now. . . . We were all coming off the ’60s and ’70s . . . there was still a lot about women’s rights and . . . people were still looking for equality and their place in the world, and that seemed to be more what was important.”

Interestingly enough, our data and public opinion poll data suggest that for many parents, diversity in public schools is still very important. For instance, in one poll an overwhelming majority of Whites—96%—agreed that Black and White children should attend the same schools. Another poll found that a majority, or 66% of White parents, say that it is “very” or “somewhat” important for their children to attend a diverse school. Only 16% of White parents said that racial integration was “not important at all.” Meanwhile, polls show that at least 80% of African American parents believe it is either “very” or “somewhat” important for their child’s school to be racially diverse. Only 10% of Black parents said it was “not important at all” (see Wells et al., 2004a).

But since the class of 1980 left their diverse schools, income inequality has grown, leaving the “haves”—primarily upper-middle-class and upper-class professionals and business owners—more focused than ever on maintaining their status by giving their children educational opportunities that other children lack (see Drier et al., 2004; Oakes & Wells, 2004). Today, the most successful graduates feel a lot of pressure to enroll their own children in the “best” schools—as defined almost exclusively by state tests and rankings—and they recounted how much less pressure their parents felt about getting them into the “right” school.

Furthermore, looking back, what the graduates valued most when they were in school was a broader understanding of “good” schools—everything from creative teachers to strong theater and music programs to winning sports teams to the racial diversity of their classmates. But as parents in this “different time,” many interviewees said that they feel compelled to put test scores before diversity when choosing a school for their daughters and sons (Wells et al., 2004a; see Wells & Holme, 2005).

Therefore, despite the finding that graduates of these six high schools strongly valued their experiences in desegregated schools, and in part because of the finding that these graduates lead far more segregated lives than they did 20 years ago, we also found that White graduates describe their children’s schools as more segregated than their own. This is not the case, however, for a majority of graduates of color, who seem to have sought out more diverse schools in both the public and private sectors.

Of the White interviewees who had school-aged children, about half had them enrolled in schools that they described as at least somewhat racially diverse. Although more of the Black and Latino graduates’ children were in diverse schools—about two thirds—many noted that these schools were becoming less diverse as desegregation plans end and their communities experienced White flight. As disappointing as these figures may be, they are still better than the graduates’ self-reporting on their neighborhoods, suggesting that today, like 25 years ago, the public schools are more diverse than their neighborhoods.

The explanations that the graduates give for their choice of schools also vary across racial and ethnic lines, with White graduates placing much more emphasis on academics and school quality than on diversity as the key variable in their choice of schools for their children. Meanwhile, the graduates of color were far more likely to cite “diversity” as a key factor in their school choice decision and to make the link between school quality and the racial makeup of the school in their assessment. In other words, the graduates of color often offered a more sophisticated assessment of the old adage that “green follows white,” whereas White graduates, particularly those with children in racially isolated schools, tended to downplay the role of race in their school choices.

What is clear, especially in the way that the White graduates make sense of the contrast between their high school experiences and their children’s, is that this is indeed a different time.

For White Graduates: Academics Trumps Diversity

An underlying theme that clearly influenced the way in which the White graduates talked about their own school choices for their children was the idea that they are making decisions about their children in a very different social and political context than when they were going to school. The stakes are higher, they say, for students today to achieve academically in order to get into a good college and succeed, and thus, they seek schools with the necessary academic rigor to help their children “make it.”

What is so interesting about our data on the White graduates is that many of their responses to our questions about their school choices for their own children mirror some of the conclusions from a 1998 report published by Public Agenda titled *Time to Move On*. This report presented findings from focus groups and a survey that asked Black and White parents which they would chose if offered the option of a school with high academic standards *or* a school that was racially and ethnically diverse. Given these choices—as if high academic standards and racial diversity are mutually exclusive characteristics of a school—the vast majority of Black and White parents said that the quality of the academic program was more important.

Furthermore, the White graduates from our study tended to talk about academic quality of a school as a decontextual and easily measured characteristic. Clearly, the current educational policy framework in the United States, with its strong emphasis on testing and accountability, has led more and more parents to believe that these “objective” and quantifiable measures of student achievement provide the best indications of the “good” versus the “bad” schools. Others make more subtle assumptions about the

relationships between the race and SES of the student body at a particular school (see Holme, 2002).

At the same time, these graduates are being bombarded with news reports and information on how critical it is for high school and college graduates to be competitive in the current “high-skilled” job market. As one Topeka High graduate with children in predominantly White public schools explained, the stakes are higher for future workers to have more and better educational credentials: “More things are requiring higher education and it would be important to have racial diversity, [but] academically would be primarily number one.” When asked where racial diversity would fall on his list of priorities for his children’s school, he said, “Somewhere down the line but . . . [long pause] going to a racially diverse school from my perspective and being a parent now it would be good, but being racially diverse isn’t going to get you a job.”

Armed with these beliefs—that it is fairly easy to figure out which schools are the “best” in terms of academics and the importance of strong academic credentials for their children’s future—the vast majority of White graduates of the schools we studied said that they will not sacrifice their children’s education to make sure they are exposed to racial diversity, as much as they say that they value that diversity. They were also quick to distinguish “diversity” from “school quality” despite what they said about how valuable their own school desegregation experiences had been. For example, when we asked a White 1980 graduate of Dwight Morrow if the racial makeup of his children’s schools was a factor when he and his wife were deciding where they would live, he said quite clearly,

No. The only thing that I am interested in for my children is to secure them. . . . I feel an obligation to secure for them the best opportunity to succeed which in my belief is presenting them . . . with what we identify as the best education. You have all these ranking of school districts . . . so our decision was a school system. . . . That was what brought us . . . that was the tail that wagged the dog really.

When asked about the life experiences that he had in high school that his children would miss out on in their virtually all-White suburban schools, he was quick to say that he would not send his children to Dwight Morrow. “They can gain life experience through life. Education is more important than it was 20 years ago.”

Similarly, a White Austin High School graduate who was a strong supporter of diverse public schools and who said that he greatly valued his experience in high school, put his own children into an elite, virtually all-White and affluent private school because he was concerned about the academic rigor in the public schools. He explained that the decision he and

his wife made to enroll their children in this private school had “nothing” to do with race and “everything” to do with education. He said he was not impressed with the level of teaching and learning in the public schools (although he had little specific information on what was going on in the public schools).

So this is ironic. I’m not giving my children the opportunity I had. I mean, they have a different opportunity. They’re getting a much better education. I do math with my daughter every night and think, “I wish I’d had this. I could have been good in math if I had this kind of education.” . . . So educationally they’re getting a much better education, but they’re not as exposed racially and I feel . . . that’s the part that’s the down side for me. . . . It’s a very White school. It’s a very White, disgustingly affluent school.

Meanwhile, a White Shaker Heights graduate explained why he and his wife decided to stay in a predominantly White school district after moving out of Shaker. He said that the public schools have an excellent reputation based on various measures he had read in the newspaper, including “test scores, graduation rates, you know, the proficiency exams at the different grade levels, they also do . . . pupil-to-student ratios and per capita student spending, that type of thing.” He said based on those indicators, Shaker Heights public schools appear to have slipped over the last several years, while the district where he lives now has what is considered to be one of the top-three high schools in northwest Ohio.

Many of these White graduates whose children are in predominantly White schools are doing quite well economically, living in very affluent communities and holding well-paying jobs. As graduates of racially diverse public schools themselves, they do not appear to have suffered in the long run from their school experiences. But they are convinced that this is indeed a very different time.

Interestingly enough, even most of the White graduates who currently have their children enrolled in diverse public schools told us that they would have no qualms about pulling their children out of those schools and putting them in more racially homogeneous schools if they thought for a minute that the quality of the education was not good enough. One White Dwight Morrow graduate with children in diverse public schools explained that he would not send his kids to Dwight Morrow because it is “too tough a school.” He added,

I will deal with that as the kids get older. I mean, they’re going to diverse schools now, but I’ll definitely deal with it in high school. If it’s—they keep the academics and there isn’t any, you know, safety

concerns, that's where they'll go. I think it'll be good for them. But whenever they say, "I'm not gonna have my kids be an experiment." Well, as a parent, that's when you realize what that means.

The White graduates also noted that although many of them participated in school desegregation plans that reassigned them to more racially diverse public schools, such policies are no longer legitimate, and they now demand more control over where their children end up attending school. They told us that they do not want their children bused across town unless it is by choice to attend superior schools. Some of these White graduates also noted that "racial/ethnic diversity" in this country is far more diverse now than when they were in school, and although they want their children to be exposed to students of different backgrounds, this does not mean just Black students. Indeed, for some, "too many" Black students in a particular school is something to avoid. Predominantly Black schools seemed to symbolize "bad" schools even though several of these White graduates had graduated from such mostly Black schools themselves.

Still, it is important to note that the vast majority of White graduates we interviewed said that they valued their own experiences in racially mixed schools and wanted their sons and daughters to attend schools that reflected the diversity of our society. Some of these class of 1980 graduates were even passionate about this issue. One White graduate, for instance, told us of her choice to send her children to a Spanish immersion school because of the diversity of the student population. She said that she believes that decision and her commitment to having her children in a diverse environment is "definitely a legacy of my . . . high school."

Another White mother who graduated from Shaker Heights High School and who currently sends her children to racially diverse public schools in Shaker explained to us why she chose to move back to this still diverse community and enroll her children in public schools, even as a growing number of her White neighbors are opting for more homogeneous private schools:

I wanted to support the community and keep the community strong and . . . it was very important for me to have my children have that type of worldly experience. I think what a lot of the neighbors forget is when their kids get out there in 20 years or 15 years, Whites will probably be in the minority and they don't realize it because they weren't raised in a community that promoted cultural diversity.

But the actions of this graduate's neighbors symbolize the pressures that the White graduates across the six sites tend to feel and the fears that they express as a result of that pressure. Thus, even as they embrace diversity, they are clear that in the current context, this commitment only goes so far,

and once they have concerns about the perceived quality of the schools, they will opt out of a “diverse” school to attend a “better” school. Thus, even while these graduates lament that their children will not learn about people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in school the way they did, the sense of loss about this lack of diversity does not outweigh their anxiety about helping their children “get ahead.”

Graduates of Color: More Committed to Diversity and More Insightful About What It Means

Some of the graduates of color from the six high schools in our study echo their White counterparts in terms of placing a greater emphasis on academics than on diversity when it comes to choosing schools for their own children. Still, most of these graduates tend to see a more complicated relationship between race and school quality than do their White counterparts.

For instance, one Latino graduate of Muir High School explained to us, in much the same way the White graduates cited above did, that he would sacrifice some degree of diversity to assure that his daughter was in a school with a strong academic program. He explained, “I have got to be honest with you, I would sacrifice—if the choice were mine—some diversity for quality of education. The bottom line for me is that my daughter is going to be going away to college in 8 years.”

Yet the difference between the responses of these graduates of color and those of the White graduates is that they are often talking about sacrificing some degree of “diversity” in terms of having their children in a school setting with more students who are like them. In other words, when these graduates of color make these kinds of comments, they are usually talking about enrolling their children in schools with very few other students of color—schools in which their own children are one of a small number of African American or Latino students. This is different from the White graduates who are talking about nondiverse schools in which their children are with a lot of students “like them” in terms of race.

This distinction points to an important difference in how the graduates on different sides of the color line make sense of the relationship between the racial makeup of their children’s schools and the academic opportunities available in those schools. Indeed, it was the graduates of color who were more likely to imply that they understood an old desegregation adage that in a predominantly White society, “green follows white”—meaning that predominantly White schools are more likely to have the resources and curriculum (not to mention the social status and prestige) to help students achieve to high levels and matriculate to better colleges and universities.

Thus, while White graduates were far less likely to have contemplated the complicated way in which race overlaps and intersects with school quality (or perceived school quality) issues, graduates of color have a much clearer understanding. As one African American graduate of Dwight Morrow and mother of two children who attend a predominantly White Catholic school explained as she reflected on whether she would send her children to Englewood schools today,

Would I send my kids to Englewood schools now? Probably not because there is no integration and I just think . . . I am not going to say that I don't want them to be around Black kids, but whenever a community or school system turns to be 98% Black, people don't care anymore and the money stops going into the schools and the legislation is not really going into it. People don't care what really happens. I would say that wherever you have a large amount of White people, your kids are going to learn and that is just my opinion. That is why they didn't go to Englewood because the people have given up on it and they don't really care.

This understanding on the part of graduates of color helps to explain why a larger percentage of them (compared with the White graduates) have put their children into private schools. Given the still very segregated housing situation described above, these graduates are often forced to seek out private schools to keep their children out of predominantly Black or Latino schools.

The other major issue that emerged in our early stage of analyzing these data is that many of these graduates of color, particularly the African American graduates, struggle to find the right balance between "diversity" and "racial isolation." As one African American Muir graduate pointed out, diversity in schools is necessary, but too few African American students is not good. She said that she chose a private school for her daughter because it was more diverse than any of the other schools she looked at. She recalled that in one school she looked at, the student body was only 1% Black in her daughter's grade, "and that was just not enough for me."

It appears that White graduates and graduates of color both think that "racial diversity" is an important component of their children's schools today, but they have very different ways of conceptualizing what that diversity is and how those concepts then relate to the "academic quality" of these schools, which they also see as being extremely, sometimes more, important.

CONCLUSION: POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By the late 1970s, the hard work to get Black, White, and Latino students together under one school roof had paid off in hundreds of school districts

across the country. The struggle for racial equality needed to go to the “next level,” which would have included not just the public schools, but also such policies as housing integration. Unfortunately, the schools were left, in essence, holding the bag as the country abandoned broader social change (see Wells et al., 2004a).

Clearly, once these graduates left their racially diverse high schools, desegregation and greater racial equality were not national priorities. In fact, dismantling school desegregation became a much higher priority, and there was the class of 1980, more prepared for racial integration than any cohort before them, in the midst of a society that was in many ways moving in the other direction.

We think that it is important to contrast the experiences of these graduates in racially diverse public schools with the political agenda of the last 25 years that tries to defy their experiences by moving the country away from an emphasis on racial integration and equality. In this way, it is clear that public schools that have managed to bring people of different racial backgrounds together for even a short period of time have been working against the prevailing trends.

The graduates of these schools have not changed the world—in fact, most have, often unwittingly, done their part as adults to perpetuate our segregated society. Still, in their sense of loss about the racial diversity they once enjoyed in high school, there is the hope that our segregated society is not the way it has to be.

In the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent ruling in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the majority found that “student-body diversity is a compelling state interest.” Although this ruling applied to a law school admissions policy, it has major implications for K–12 education, where it can be argued that the state interest is even more compelling. In fact, the First Circuit Court of Appeals recently made such an argument in a case involving the Lynn, Massachusetts, school district.

Meanwhile, polls show that the vast majority of parents, Black or White, support the *concept* of racially mixed public schools, but they strongly prefer voluntary or choice-based desegregation policies to mandatory reassignments. But in this era of school choice policy proliferation, it should be fairly easy to give the parents what they want. Indeed, if we combine the legal argument of a state interest in diverse educational settings with the opinion poll data and the voices of people who lived through school desegregation, we begin to see the demand for public policies to support instead of dismantle desegregated schools.

How would we get there? The answer seems to be voluntary school desegregation and greater housing integrations, which policy makers could facilitate in several ways. Here are four specific recommendations for federal, state, and local policy makers to consider.

1. Broaden measures of school quality and accountability to include indicators other than standardized test scores. For instance, racial diversity could be considered one measure of a “good” public school in an increasingly diverse society.
2. Amend current public school choice policies, including charter school laws, to make them more supportive of parents and educators who want to start and maintain racially diverse schools.
3. Increase the often pitiful federal and state support for school districts that are trying to maintain desegregated schools.
4. Pursue noneducation goals, such as housing integration and suburb diversification, that will facilitate the creation of more diverse public schools.

Far into the future, the political choices made and the priorities set during and after this monumental *Brown* anniversary will dictate the course for this nation, so diverse and still so separate in many ways. We can continue in our current direction. Or we can choose to listen to the voices of those who experienced the benefits of school desegregation first hand, men and women who know in their hearts and minds that our increasingly diverse society need not be ever more separate and unequal, that we can do so much more and that it is worth it to do so.

Notes

1 This article on the main findings from the Teachers College-UCLA “Understanding Race and Education Study” is based on a 2004 research report from that study titled *How Desegregation Changed Us: The Effects of Racially Mixed Schools on Students and Society* and a 2003 paper, “Looking Back on Desegregation From Segregated Lives: A Study of Adult Graduates of Racially Mixed Schools,” which we presented at the Harvard Civil Rights Project’s Color Lines Conference.

2 By “racially mixed,” we mean between 40% and 75% of any one race, and no more than 25% off the racial balance of the city or town for any one race.

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