

Integration Has Had Its Day

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The alarm has been sounded: Racial isolation in the public schools is on the rise.

The Harvard Project on School Desegregation reported earlier this month that segregation has increased steadily over the last 15 years, to a level greater than at any time since the 1971 Supreme Court decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, which authorized "forced busing" to achieve racial balance.

Moreover, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a comprehensive effort to test the knowledge of a representative national sample of primary and secondary school students, has recently shown a widening gap between the educational achievements of white and black students.

But while great disparities do exist in the quality of public education -- black and Latino students in central cities are especially poorly served -- a renewed emphasis on racial integration is the wrong response. True equality of opportunity for the poorest public school students means smaller class sizes, longer school hours and greater support services in these schools.

In any event, both the Supreme Court and the people have shown little enthusiasm for open-ended judicial intervention aimed at securing racial balance. The Court's opinion in the 1995 case *Missouri v. Jenkins*, for example, reversed a lower court's order that Kansas City undertake an expensive plan to attract suburban whites to an increasingly black, inner-city district through specialized "magnet schools." Indeed, Federal courts around the country, especially in the South, have relaxed earlier decrees ordering school districts to promote integration, even though those districts have been moving toward resegregation.

Meanwhile, the flight of white middle-class families from urban districts subject to desegregation decrees has made it all but impossible to achieve anything beyond token integration in many places.

In 1972, before court-ordered busing began, 60 percent of Boston's public school students were white. Though the courts have been more flexible about integration efforts in recent years, only 18 percent of the students in this struggling school system now are white. Denver, Norfolk, Va., and Savannah, Ga., which were subject to mandatory busing, have also seen a decline in white enrollment.

Of course, no public school district should discriminate on the basis of race, or actively promote racial segregation. But in the many districts where most students are nonwhite, it has long made more sense to address those students' educational needs directly, rather

than to spend scarce resources trying to get white families to send their children to the same schools as minorities.

Many nonwhite parents are more concerned about the quality of their children's schools than about racial balance for its own sake. All parents want basically the same things from public schools: safety, order and the teaching of solid academic skills. Regardless of racial composition, schools that deliver these things will be judged successful.

A compulsive focus on racial integration can involve condescension (no doubt unintended) toward nonwhite students and their families. As Justice Clarence Thomas put it in his concurring opinion in *Missouri v. Jenkins*, "It never ceases to amaze me that the courts are so willing to assume that anything that is predominantly black must be inferior."

The belief that "black students suffer an unspecified psychological harm from segregation that retards their mental and educational development," Justice Thomas said, rests on an assumption of black inferiority.

To presume that blacks must have a sufficient quota of whites in the classroom to learn is to presume that something is inherently wrong with blacks. But while black kids may not need to have whites sitting nearby in order to master arithmetic, the most disadvantaged children need schools with resources sufficient to compensate for the influences of poverty they bring to the classroom.

Integrationists assume that the presence of whites is the only sure way to draw attention to this need. But that was yesterday's struggle. Those of us who believe in equal educational opportunity but not forced racial mixing should demand that students isolated in hard-pressed, big-city school districts receive the attention they deserve.

Drawing (Laurent Cilluffo)