

Resegregation Haunts Urban Schools

Where integrated schools are possible, policymakers struggle for strategies

By Del Stover

It's been seven years since a federal judge ruled that Charlotte, N.C., school officials could no longer use race in student assignments—and five years since the school board agreed to a student assignment plan based on neighborhood schools. Now, school officials are confronting the consequences of those decisions: The district is undergoing a gradual resegregation along racial and economic lines, with many minority children isolated in the highest-poverty, low-achieving schools.

For a district long recognized as one of the nation's most successful examples of urban school desegregation, any move backward is a bitter turn of events. It also poses an intractable dilemma for local policymakers, who are discovering that good-faith efforts to promote racial diversity in schools are so far proving unable to offset a slew of powerful demographic, economic, and social forces that segregate the community's general population.

"As a school board, one of our core beliefs is that diversity is something to build upon," says Joe "Coach" White, chair



Students at Omaha's Central High School rally in front of the school in support of Omaha Public Schools. In a move some decried as state-sponsored segregation, the state legislature voted last spring to divide the city school system into three districts, possibly along racial lines.

of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board. On the other hand, "because of our inability to control where people live, and our inability to cross-bus ... we've probably reached the point where it is very difficult to force [integration] anymore."

That's not to say that White has given up on the ideal of racially integrated schools. Few urban school leaders have. But there's no denying the challenges districts face today. Deeply segregated hous-

ing patterns make it difficult to integrate schools. Student busing to promote integration is politically untenable. Using race as a factor in student assignment plans has come under attack in the courts. More parents—white and black—are calling for neighborhood schools and showing a willingness to accept resegregation as the price of convenience and comfort.

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NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), the urban initiative of NSBA's National Affiliate program, addresses the programmatic, fiscal, and governance challenges of urban public education on behalf of its 101 member school boards and the almost 8 million students they serve. Through legislative advocacy, conferences, workshops, seminars, and publications, CUBE has been in the forefront of cultivating excellence in urban public schools for more than three decades.

About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

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URBAN BRIEFS

Oakland housing initiative spells challenges for schools

While it's been hailed as one of the most diverse cities in the country, Oakland, Calif., is also one of the most segregated, with the city's topography serving as an unofficial economic divide: Those with means live in the "hills," while working-class residents (which comprise about two-thirds of the population) live in the "flats." That is, until recently.

Shortly after his election in 1998, Mayor Jerry Brown launched an economic development initiative he called the 10K plan, which in essence aims to lure 10,000 residents into the downtown area through the construction of new residential units. Critics have blasted the plan as shortsighted and unilateral.

Housing advocates complain the initiative doesn't offer enough affordable units. Urban planners say the plan lacks a diversity of attractions and amenities. And school district officials have disputed projections that call for only a modest increase in student enrollment in the downtown area.

A troubled school system, Oakland Unified School District has posted poor academic performance for years, though the latest scores show the district improving at a faster rate than the state average.

Still, the district has lost more than a quarter of its students in the last five years, exacerbating the financial problems that forced the state to take over the system in 2003.

City officials argue the school district's underenrollment should allow them to handle an influx of students. But district officials say the vacancy is uneven and in the city's downtown area, all of the elementary schools are at or near capacity.

To make matters worse, school board members recently battled over the future of an 8.5-acre parcel of district property that a developer wants to build a 3,100-unit housing project on. School board members opposed the sale but the state has the final say. As of press time, no decision had been made.

Aside from political clashes, outsiders wonder what kind of impact all the new development will have on the city's demographics. Brown has been vocal

about his desire to bring more affluent residents to an area that has been traditionally poor and neglected. But then, what will that do to the residents who are already there?

It's no coincidence, some say, that the 8.5 acres the developer is eyeing includes an alternative high school, preschools for mostly low-income Chinese and Hispanic students, and the district's headquarters: relics of the past that have no place in the city's plans for the future.

Jefferson Parish schools recovering from Katrina

In a year that surely tested the mettle of many Gulf Coast superintendents, Jefferson Parish Public Schools chief Diane Roussel was named the 2005 superintendent of the year by the Louisiana Association of School Executives. And who could really argue against that nomination?

After all, the school district managed to perform superhuman feats by opening schools a mere five weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck. True, the storm and the resultant flooding didn't hit this suburb west of New Orleans as badly as it did the Crescent City, but Jefferson Parish didn't escape unscathed either.

Of the district's 84 school buildings, 70 were damaged, four beyond repair. But as quickly as the district declared itself in a state of emergency, it dispatched a team to survey the damage and encouraged school districts across the country to "adopt" one of its schools and donate materials and money.

Meanwhile, district faculty, administrators, and staff cleaned out classrooms in time to welcome students back to school on Oct. 3. About 30,000 kids showed up, far less than the 52,000 the district served before the storm. But attendance numbers have risen steadily and now stand at about 43,000.

Part of the district's speedy recovery can be attributed to its dedicated staff and sound leadership. But the system's success is also an offshoot of the parish's gumption. Parish officials kept the borders closed for only a short period of time (little more than a week) and, as a result, power and other utilities came back quicker, clean-up efforts started earlier,

and residents and business owners worked to bring normalcy back to the area.

All of their effort has paid off. While home prices in Orleans Parish fell by almost 10 percent in the year after Katrina, it rose 23 percent in Jefferson Parish. And since the storm, Jefferson has eclipsed New Orleans in size, with almost double the population.

This has helped the school district to enjoy a \$60 million surplus instead of the \$60 million deficit it faced immediately after the storm, allowing officials to open several new schools and programs this year, including its first ever magnet schools.

But it isn't all good news. Crime has risen exponentially—the number of homicides increased by 70 percent from last year—while the parish's police department is down several hundred officers. The shortage has forced the department to reduce its presence in district high schools, a program it began after a 1995 school shooting. Worries abound about the parish's growth and its transformation from a bedroom community to a true city, with all of the social ills to prove it.

Microsoft gives Philadelphia a 'School of the Future'

It was one of the most anticipated school openings in the country. Indeed, the first day at Philadelphia's School of the Future saw more visitors, reporters, and dignitaries roaming its hallways than students, which numbered just 170—a conservative start to an ambitious effort to reform high school education.

The protagonists? Well, aside from the students (85 percent of whom hail from lower-income homes) and the district (which under lightning-rod CEO Paul Vallas is trying to reinvent itself), footing the \$63 million cost for the new school is Microsoft, the software giant that devoted three years, several staff members, and a blueprint for how the school should operate. And while Microsoft made a conscious decision not to monetarily fund the project, the wealth of intellectual property the conglomerate has invested in the school (from a teacher's assistant tool to an "education competency wheel" that will guide instruction, learning, and professional development) is felt everywhere in the 162,000-square-

foot building.

To be honest, it's getting harder to find a place in education where Microsoft founder Bill Gates' influence isn't felt. Since 2002, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has funneled more than \$1.2 billion into creating smaller, more specialized high schools, and it heads a \$125 million effort in "early college" high schools, which allow freshmen to concurrently earn a high school diploma and two years of college credit.

With Warren Buffett's recent \$31 billion gift to the Gates Foundation, the charity doubled its assets to more than \$60 billion, firmly cementing itself as the most powerful charitable foundation in the world. Once accused of using philanthropy to mask the unscrupulous tactics he employed in business, Gates' stature, especially among his would-be recipients, has been elevated. His comments on the futility of the nation's high schools in a February 2004 speech to state governors was met with genuine reflection, not disdain.

But Gates isn't a pioneer. Andrew Carnegie donated an estimated \$380 million over his lifetime, much of it to improve public education. Henry Ford established the Ford Foundation, the second-largest charity behind the Gates Foundation, and tried his hand at school reform, as well.

Gates, through money and the types of initiatives he supports, stands to make the most impact in education. Whether that impact is lasting and sustainable is another matter, which is why Philadelphia's School of the Future has remained on many people's watch list.

NYC stands tough against cell phones in schools

The New York City Department of Education touched off a firestorm of controversy last spring when it decided to take a tough stance against student use of cell phones. In truth, the nation's largest school district has banned communication devices, including mobile phones, from school campuses since 1998.

But enforcement of the policy was limited to the handful of schools that had metal detectors, which aside from body searching is the only way to know whether or not a student is carrying a cell phone. In April, the district (as part of an overall effort to tighten school security) began

randomly scanning schools throughout the system.

The change not only snagged 39 weapons, it also caught about 3,000 cell phones and the ire of parents and city council members. The former filed a lawsuit, claiming the department was infringing upon their constitutional rights to protect their children, while the latter attempted to pass a measure that would allow students to bring cell phones to school but only use them for safety reasons.

Much of the backlash the department has received centered on parents' concerns about being able to get in contact with their child in the event of an emergency. Tragedies like the 1999 school shooting in Columbine, where students actually used wireless phones to contact family members, loomed large in many minds.

In fact, the Jefferson County, Colo., school district, where Columbine High School is located, lets students bring cell phones to school but prohibits their use during class time. "Parents want the phones with the students," Sherida Peterson, Jefferson County's chief academic officer, told *Wireless Week*. "Without them, we would have a communications problem."

But New York City department officials say it's the cell phones themselves that cause a communications problem. In the past school year, the department reported nearly 2,500 cell phone disruptions, ranging from kids taking photos to making threats to one another.

"We are sympathetic to the concerns of parents, but our experience is, if cell phones are allowed in school, they will be used, and when they are—whether for talking or messaging or taking photographs—they inevitably disrupt the school learning environment," school department spokesman Keith Kalb said to *RCR Wireless News*.

And despite other urban school districts, like Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, and Boston, which allow cell phones at school, so long as they are turned off in the classroom, New York City doesn't appear to be softening its stance any time soon. According to a 2002 survey by the National Association of School Resource Officers, the department may be justified. Nearly 70 percent of the school-based police officers surveyed across the country believed that student use of cell phones in school would detract from school safety in a crisis. ■

CUBE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Race, charter schools, civil disobedience, and student achievement were just a few of the topics discussed at CUBE's 38th Annual Conference, held in Phoenix, Ariz., Sept. 28-Oct. 1.

The winner of CUBE's third annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence—the Norfolk (Va.) Public Schools—also was announced at an awards banquet Saturday evening.

This was the second CUBE meeting in recent years to top 200 attendees, which CUBE Director Katrina Kelley said is a hopeful sign that the organization's strong programming and willingness to tackle tough issues is increasingly recognized by urban policymakers.

With 15 conference sessions on urban policy issues, it's impossible to do justice to them all. But here are a few highlights:

CUBE chair reviews 'State of Urban Education'

While offering his observations about the "state of urban education," CUBE Steering Committee Chair Brian K.

Perkins shared a passage with conference attendees from Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." In the poem, the driver of a horse-drawn sled stops to watch snow falling in the woods, before moving on, reminding himself that he has "promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep."

Why start his address with that passage? The words, Perkins suggested, reflect the poet's sense of responsibility—that when you've a job to do, you "can't sit idly by and watch the world transform in front



One of the highlights of the conference was Rudolph "Rudy" Crew, superintendent of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools.



CULINARY ARTS: On a site visit to Phoenix's Metro Tech High School, school board members walked through the kitchen of the culinary arts program, where students prepare for a career as a professional chef, baker, or food server. Metro Tech was one of many schools that hosted CUBE conference attendees.

of you." Urban school leaders, he added, can do no less. No one can rest easy when the future for hundreds of thousands of students are at stake.

"We cannot be satisfied until all our children are pulled out [of poverty], all of our children have the skills they need to live productive lives, and until all our children feel valued and respected," Perkins said.

The challenges facing urban schools are significant, he noted. Many students live in poverty, leave school every day for unstable homes, or struggle to learn English. They face inequities in educational resources and opportunities, and they are increasingly segregated by race.

But these challenges are offset by real progress, he said. Urban schools have made strides in improving student achievement, and test scores outshine average state gains. More and more urban schools are providing children with opportunities to take Advanced Placement and other rigorous coursework.

Urban school leaders should be commended for this work, but before they "can sleep," board members must ensure the safety of schools, do more to help students succeed in school, demand that the federal government provide adequate

funding, and turn "urban schools into pinnacles of success."

In ending his remarks to a standing ovation, Perkins paraphrased Frost: "We have promises to keep. We have promises to keep, and we have miles to go before we sleep."

Crew: Real school reform needs systemic change

To boost student achievement, urban educators attempt to work harder and faster to do the same old things. But is that really the best way to tackle the challenges of urban education? Is that actually the way to boost achievement?

Those were some of the questions that Rudolph "Rudy" Crew, superintendent of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, attempted to answer during a keynote address.

According to Crew, the challenges facing urban schools cannot be fixed with something as simple as a new curriculum, more staff training, or a new reading initiative, he said. Such efforts, while helpful, remain somewhat superficial and fail to get to the root of what keeps achievement

levels down in urban schools.

"You can put your best principal in a school that, unfortunately, has been in poverty's hands for 30 years or more, and that person will only be able to have his or her influence met by this poverty ... an incredibly insurmountable obstacle" to student learning, he said.

Sometimes a good principal can boost student achievement, Crew said. But, if not, the problem might not be with the principal's talent or dedication. What might be needed is a more drastic, systemic change—a longer school day or school year, a new compensation package that attracts the district's best teachers to the troubled school, a flexible school schedule that allows struggling students an extra year to complete high school, or better preparation by teacher colleges to help new teachers succeed in an urban classroom.

The bottom line is that school boards need to look harder—to think "outside the box"—at what's really holding back their students and their schools. "Everybody talks about the global economy," Crew said, "yet if we go back into these school systems, not one piece of the curriculum has changed."

So it's time to rethink how urban schools are run, he said. "This is where your conversation has to be," he said. "You've got to give as much time to that conversation as you do to picking your textbooks."

Charters are here to stay; financial impact will be felt

If urban school leaders had any doubts about the future of the charter school movement, NSBA Staff Attorney Tom Hutton put them to rest at a Saturday seminar: "The bottom line for charters is that they are here to stay."

Yet, the political environment may be changing somewhat for charter schools, Hutton said. Although state policymakers haven't lost their enthusiasm for charters, there is growing concern about incidents of financial mismanagement. And policymakers are taking note of studies that suggest student performance in urban charter schools is no better on average—and sometimes worse—than the city public schools.

So, Hutton said, school boards can expect to see increased oversight of existing charter schools, and applications to start new charters may undergo more scrutiny.

Such scrutiny would be welcome, but



To help urban school leaders become more "cultural competent" was the goal of Barbara McCloud (right) and Donna Elam, who told their CUBE audience that the work of board members begins with the development of institutional values and principles that promote the belief that all children will receive a good education.

urban school leaders still must confront the impact that charters have on their districts. In some states, for example, the proliferation of charters draws away thousands of students from the urban schools.

That financial impact is of concern to Christopher Thomas, legal counsel for the Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA) and a speaker during the panel session. Thomas described Arizona as the "wild, wild West" of the movement, with liberal rules for chartering new schools. Today, the state has 500 charter schools, enrolling 75,000—or 8 percent—of the state's students and costing the traditional public schools millions of dollars annually in lost state aid.

Yet, after initially taking a tough stance against charters, ASBA has chosen a more collaborative approach toward charter operators, inviting them to become "associate members" and take advantage of ASBA policy and insurance services, Thomas said.

A closer relationship with charters can have some uses, Hutton said. If nothing else, it might help to discourage marketing strategies that suggest families should abandon "failing" public schools in favor of charters—and a public schools' response pointing out the failure of some charter schools. Such talk, he noted, "undermines public confidence in all schools."

Cultural competence doesn't just happen

The America once exemplified by "Ozzie and Harriet" is disappearing—and is being replaced by a far more diverse, culturally complex society that demands urban school boards that are prepared to respond to the needs of a varied student population.

That message was delivered at the latest session of CUBE's ongoing "conversations on race" workshops. The session was led by Donna Elam, a Florida-based education consultant, and Barbara McCloud, senior associate with the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C.

Early in their presentation, Elam and McCloud underscored the point that urban school board members cannot make assumptions about their schools' readiness to serve a diverse student population. They asked board members to stand if they believed that "all children can learn." Almost everyone in the audience did.

Then they asked audience members to stand if they believed all their schools were "teaching all children to a high standard." Very few stood.

Their point: Urban school policies and practices often don't live up to what educators say they believe. And, as more chil-

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RESEGREGATION

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So what chance does an urban school board have to seriously integrate its schools?

That's the million-dollar question. And, truthfully, no one can answer it with any confidence. In many city school systems, white flight left schools deeply and irrevocably segregated long ago, and any conversation about integration seems farcical. Meanwhile, in consolidated city-county school systems and smaller cities that still retain a sizable white population, school-integration efforts are feeling the strain—and it is increasing hard to stem resegregation.

"It's a hard question," says Matthew Lassiter, a University of Michigan professor who has written on desegregation and suburban politics. "Resegregation is the norm, and the nation has lost the [political] will we once had to make a real effort toward integrating schools."

Yet, the stakes are too high for school boards to accept resegregation as inevitable, says Myron Orfield, associate professor of law and executive director of the University of Minnesota's Institute on Race and Poverty. With race and poverty so indelibly intertwined in society, and with decades of evidence making clear that high-poverty

schools are almost always low performing, urban policymakers cannot trust that they can offset the impact of resegregation by focusing on school quality alone.

"There's not a strong track record of [successfully] getting children out of intensely poor, urban schools," Orfield says. "There's nothing else that seems to work as well [as integration] for students of color."

If Orfield is right, then urban school boards must redouble their efforts. And that's why *Urban Advocate* recently took a closer look at three districts that are struggling with resegregation and the policy considerations that color their school boards' decisions. Their experiences may offer a clue as to what the future holds.

Charlotte's changing world

Court-ordered busing forced the desegregation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) in the early 1970s, and over the years, the school system achieved significant, if hardly perfect, racial integration. As important, community attitudes began to change, and although court supervision eventually ended, the school board's commitment to integration continued with a combination of busing and magnet programs.

Granted, the school system might well have gone the way of Boston, Detroit, or other urban districts—if not for the 1960

consolidation of the city and county schools, which meant white flight to the suburbs did not significantly alter the racial make-up of the district as a whole. Officials had, at least, a good racial mix with which to make desegregation feasible.

By the end of the 1990s, however, powerful forces began to unravel this enviable situation. The nation's courts became increasingly skeptical about the use of race as a factor in policy decisions, and a lawsuit by parents opposed to the district's busing plan convinced a federal judge to bar the use of race in student assignments. Under pressure from parents, the board also agreed to allow students to attend schools closer to home.

At the same time, the demographic make-up of the community was changing. A growing economy boosted student enrollment faster than the district could build schools, leading to some overcrowding. A growing minority population was largely confined to the city and other segregated pockets in the county, ensuring that minority enrollment soared in those area schools.

In a few years, white student enrollment dropped from 43 percent to 38 percent. New suburban residents, many from outside the South, arrived with little understanding of the history or sense of responsibility for the racial injustices of the past.

It's a story that urban policymakers have

COURT CASES COULD HAVE SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

A decision by the U.S. Supreme Court next year may have a significant impact on the ability of local policymakers to encourage racial diversity in urban schools.

The high court agreed this summer to hear challenges to student assignment plans in Seattle and Louisville, Ky. At issue is whether it is constitutional for K-12 schools to use race to address racial imbalances in schools.

"This is an extremely critical issue" before the court, says Matthew Lassiter, a University of Michigan professor who has written on desegregation and suburban politics. The federal courts played a major role in breaking down racial barriers in schools in past decades, he says, and the Supreme Court's upcoming ruling will determine if school boards can keep those barriers down in the years ahead.

Some civil rights and education

groups have argued that a high court ruling against race-based school assignment policies will lead to a return to the discredited "separate but equal" policies of the early 21st century. But NSBA General Counsel Francisco Negrón says he believes that traditional arguments for integrated schools won't sway the modern court.

"We're living in a 'post-integration' society," he says. If segregated schools are the result of voluntary family decisions about where to live, and there's no evidence of state-sanctioned segregation, then the court appears unlikely to rule the government has no right to intervene simply to promote integration.

That's not to say urban schools shouldn't have the right to use race in student assignments, he says. In its *amicus* brief filed with the Supreme Court, NSBA argues that promoting diversity in schools is a valid pedagogical con-

cern—and schools have a valid public interest in encouraging that diversity.

"As a matter of education, part of the job of schools is its civics role—to prepare students not just to live and work in a diverse society but in a global society," he says. "Something good happens—something good for the development of a child—when people from all walks of life come together."

Negrón says that argument might prove more persuasive given that the Supreme Court acknowledged that diversity could be a compelling state interest—if narrowly tailored—in *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, two 2003 rulings concerning race-based admissions policies at the University of Michigan.

"It's becoming more important that America graduate high school students who are able to relate to the world around them," he says.

seen time and time again, and the consequences have been predictable. Once the enrollment of minority and low-income students reaches sufficient levels in a school, an exodus of white and middle-class parents begins—and then accelerates. The trend is easy to see at the district's 17 high schools. Since 2002, the number of schools with more than a 75-percent minority enrollment has climbed from three to seven. At three of those schools, the exodus of students from white and middle-class households has led to what's called "bright flight"—the loss of nearly half of the schools' gifted students.

Today, the school board is still pondering what—if anything—it can do to reverse this trend. The district remains generally successful, and the board's recent efforts have focused on putting attention and resources into its most academically struggling schools. School officials also say they hope to reverse public perceptions about the quality of the education offered by the district, as well as ease the resentment of some suburban parents who complain that CMS has grown too large and unresponsive to their needs. It's an issue that cannot be ignored: Last year, parental dissatisfaction prompted a proposal to break up the consolidated school system, and unhappy suburbanites helped defeat a \$427 million bond issue.

If resegregation concerns aren't at the top of the board's list of priorities, those concerns haven't been forgotten. The district will continue to support its system of magnet programs to stem the tide, White says, and focus on improving school performance to reassure parents who might otherwise think of leaving the public schools.

But the future depends on how well school officials can change public opinion and get past what White sees not as racism—but as "me-ism," a failure of citizens to value the public good and recognize the value of integrated schools.

"If you asked the average Joe citizen on the street, 'Do you believe diversity can be a strength [in community schools]?', you would get a yes," he says. "But when you get to the nitty-gritty of how it will impact their child ... well, they say, 'If my child has to travel four miles to a different school, I'm not being treated fairly.'"

Omaha: A step backward?

That mindset also has taken hold in Omaha, Neb., where an ugly political brawl has erupted—ostensibly over state legislation to break up the Omaha Public



This 10-year-old San Francisco student attends one of the most racially diverse school systems in our nation. Yet, rising housing prices and parental demands for school choice threaten the district's efforts to prepare him for society's diversity.

Schools (OPS) into three separate districts, possibly along racial lines. What many people don't realize is that the controversial measure, which garnered national headlines, was the state's response to a gradually escalating dispute over funding policies that threatened the city's integration efforts.

It didn't have to turn into a fight, says Superintendent John Mackiel. The city has retained a sizable white population, and, although elementary school enrollment somewhat mirrors the city's segregated housing, a good magnet program has allowed OPS to maintain a healthy degree of racial diversity in its schools.

But that level of integration has been affected by a growing Latino population, and by state funding inequities that have strained the district's ability to serve English language learners, as well as to maintain the quality programs that win the support of middle-class families. Without adequate financial support, Mackiel says, the city's integrated schools are threatened because dissatisfied parents can easily transfer to suburban schools under the state's generous choice program.

After years of being ignored by the state legislature, and after neighboring districts declined to back OPS' efforts to win adequate funding, the school district filed suit against the state's education funding for-

mula. It also attempted to enforce a century-old law putting all schools within the city limits under OPS authority, a law ignored by white politicians in the years when desegregation first came to Nebraska.

It was a controversial escalation of the dispute, but one that Mackiel says was a calculated move to protect the district from political maneuvers in the state capitol. He says it was designed to force public debate on the school system's concerns and state policymakers' disregard for equitable education and integration.

"We've reached the point where we can say: Enough with the self-deception. Enough with sweeping the real issues under the rug. Enough with blaming the victims," Mackiel says. "It's time to insist that we have a legitimate dialogue about the educational future of all the youngsters in our city."

School officials made their point, but state lawmakers' response was harsher than anyone imagined. The legislature practically declared war by attempting to dismantle—and permanently silence—the school district, says OPS attorney David Pedersen. "It is a frontal assault on the goal of achieving an integrated society. It is a frontal assault on the fundamental principles of our democracy that all of us are created equal."

The dispute has exposed long-simmering racial attitudes, stoked middle-class fears about the quality of the city's schools, and put the spotlight on the political neglect of such issues as segregated housing, inequitable school funding, and discriminatory state policies.

Public opinion runs the gamut: Some white parents are adamant that they will not make sacrifices to provide equal opportunities to disadvantaged children, while others have spoken out on the educational and civic virtues of integration and equity. Minority organizations have sued to stop the state's break-up plan, which surprisingly is championed by Nebraska's sole black state senator, Ernie Chambers.

"When people say my plan would segregate or resegregate the schools, I say we're already segregated," argues Chambers, who says black children will only get a better education when black parents control their schools. "I'm not interested in segregation; I'm not interested in integration. I'm interested in quality schools."

For now, a state judge has halted enforcement of the break-up plan, and state lawmakers have backpedaled—at least to the degree that they've indicated a willingness to look at alternatives to OPS'

break-up when the legislature reconvenes next year.

Meanwhile, Mackiel says he's trying to bring officials from neighboring districts together to develop a plan that will protect their middle-class privileges but provide the city's schoolchildren with the educational resources they need—and ensure they continue to attend integrated schools. “No one understands better than superintendents and boards of education” what the issues are, he says. “Let’s roll up our sleeves and

It’s a thoughtful system, but one that hasn’t quite lived up to its promise. The diversity index only applies at schools with too many student applicants, which means those schools with good academic reputations are well integrated—but dozens of lower-performing schools are underenrolled and much more likely to be segregated, predominately by African-American or Latino students.

The school board is committed to racial diversity in the schools, says Wynns, who

attend the city’s better schools. And allowing middle-class black or Latino children to get into the school of their choice ignores the reality that they also may live in a middle-class neighborhood served by better schools. The system underrepresents the poor minority students who need integration the most.

“There aren’t really proxies for race,” Wynns says. “If you use socioeconomic factors, you don’t really reach the students you want. Your schools are filled with kids of different social and economic classes, but that’s not desegregated enough. We need socioeconomic and racial diversity.”

What next?

Such sentiment explains why American’s urban schools are as racially diverse as they are. Urban school leaders are trying. But, given the challenges facing them, any policy decisions they make will be lucky to slow—let alone stop—the trend toward resegregation.

But the fight will go on. In Hartford, Conn., a troubled but ambitious plan seeks to build magnet schools to attract white suburban students into the city, while a choice program opens up some suburban schools to city schoolchildren. In Minneapolis, a voluntary integration program allows poor, inner-city students to attend schools in suburban districts. The numbers involved are small, but it is a symbolic example of city and suburban cooperation.

Elsewhere, there are modest efforts by other government entities and nonprofit groups to go to the root of the problem: segregated housing. Some communities now require developers to set aside a portion of new developments for lower-income housing, while others offer low-interest loans to help boost the racial balance of neighborhoods.

But the bottom line is that until more Americans share the ideals of racial diversity and school integration—and are willing to do something about it—nothing much is likely to change. Omaha’s John Mackiel tells a story that best sums up the challenge school leaders face.

“This lady from the suburbs came up to me and said, ‘My youngster has 10 crayons. It’s too bad that kids in OPS have only five crayons, but it’ll be over my dead body that this changes, because the likelihood is that my child will only have seven crayons if we have to share. And I’m not going to accept my child having less than 10 crayons.’”

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“

The nation has lost the [political will] we once had to make a real effort toward integrating schools.

”

craft legislative education reform to address ... the issues of educational equity and financial equity for all youngsters.”

San Francisco: Face of the future

If only it was that easy. The San Francisco school board oversees one of the most racially diverse school systems in the nation—what board member Jill Wynns describes as the “face of the future” for many urban school districts. But developing a policy that enables schools to reflect that diversity has been a constant—and, currently, losing—battle.

It’s a battle that’s been waging since the 1970s, when the NAACP sued the school district. As part of a 1982 settlement, officials agreed to assign at least four racial or ethnic groups to every school, relying on a race-based student assignment plan and busing.

The original desegregation effort, which focused mostly on integrating African-American and Latino students, was overturned by a legal challenge from Chinese-American parents who complained their children were kept out of their preferred schools by the race-based policies. A 1999 settlement forbade the use of race in school assignments, and two years later, the district created a new assignment plan that responded to parents’ demands for more school choice but included a “diversity index”—a part of the student assignment plan that takes into account a mother’s education, family income, fluency in English, and other factors.

also serves on the CUBE Steering Committee. City residents also have been historically supportive, although Wynns has seen some cracks in that resolve—a growing attitude of the “me-ism” that plagues other communities. “We’ve had some white and Asian parents who’ve come forward and said, ‘We don’t care [about integration]. This may be bad for African-American and Latino students, but we want what we want.’”

From a policy perspective, the school board has to walk a fine balancing act, says school board member Eric Mar. Too many limits on school choice could push affluent parents to private schools or the suburbs. There also are concerns about rising housing prices, which could prevent many young parents from living in the city and accelerate a worrisome decline in white and middle-class enrollment.

The next step for the board is on hold until the U.S. Supreme Court rules next year on the constitutionality of Seattle and Jefferson County, Ky., student assignment plans that rely on race as a determining factor, Mar says. If the high court rules in favor of the districts, then San Francisco’s board likely will consider adding race to its diversity index and redrawing some attendance boundaries to promote more diversity.

Wynns agrees, saying socioeconomic factors are a poor substitute for race in attendance plans. It allows poor white children to move to a better school, for example, but ignores the reality that these children usually live in white—and more affluent—neighborhoods and tend to

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dren come to school with different cultural backgrounds, different language skills, and different academic abilities, school boards must work harder to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to learn and succeed academically.

That work begins by developing institutional values and principles that articulate the belief that all children will receive a good education, McCloud said. Then boards must develop policies, sponsor training, and put in place other systemic “structures” to ensure these values and principles become daily practice.

School boards also must ensure that district resources are distributed equitably, she said. That means resources are not only distributed equally among children, but that additional assistance is provided to students who are learning English or struggling with other obstacles to learning. An equitable education means that every child has an *equal* opportunity to learn.

Taking a closer look at achievement data also will help school boards to deal

with the needs of a diverse student body, McCloud says. By focusing on the progress of each unique student subgroup, much as the No Child Left Behind Act requires, school boards can identify those racial, ethnic, or cultural groups that are in need.

“Don’t tell me you have a school that’s met AYP,” she said. “You need to be going deeper into the data.... Achievement policies are the evidence of your cultural competence. Do your students—all your students—have access to a rigorous curriculum? Do all of your students have access to high-level courses? Do all students have access to comprehensive services ... well-trained teachers?”

Finally, urban school boards need to ensure that teachers are trained to be culturally competent, McCloud said. They need to understand the slang, the dress, and the styles of communication of students.

The bottom line, she said, is that cultural competency is essential to improve student achievement in the increasingly diverse urban schools. And its importance cannot be underestimated: “How well we educate every single child is inextricably tied to the future of this country.”



Henry A. Spears, board member in Montgomery, Ala., and former Steering Committee member, stands with his wife Katherine after receiving CUBE’s Lifetime Achievement Award. Also receiving a lifetime award at the conference was Lawrence Marshall, school board member for the Houston Independent School District.

Civil disobedience demands thoughtful response

When tens of thousands of Hispanic teenagers walked out of school last spring to join nationwide protests over America’s immigration policies, school officials confronted an unprecedented situation in which students were unsupervised and potentially at risk—and valuable instructional time was lost.

Dealing with these walkouts, however, also proved to be an invaluable experience in handling future student civil disobedience, and school officials in Fort Worth, Texas, and Orange County, Calif., shared their hard-earned lessons at a session organized by the CUBE Communications Task Force.

Orange County board member Felix Rocha Jr. admitted that a student walkout in March caught local officials by surprise. They’d learned that a national protest was scheduled for May 1 but had heard nothing about an earlier march.

“We were ill-prepared,” he said. “We didn’t know what to do. It is a frightening thing when you see 20,000 to 30,000 kids roaming the streets.”

Regrouping in preparation for the May 1 march, school officials talked with parents, community leaders, police, and other groups to seek ways to funnel students’ desire to protest into safe and appropriate



STUDENT DIALOGUE: Believing it important to hear from students themselves, the CUBE Urban Student Achievement Task Force brought in a panel of current and former students from Phoenix’s Metro Tech High School to share their insights about the role of schools in meeting the needs of immigrant students. Urban school leaders heard several poignant stories of bright students who dropped out of school or lost opportunities to attend college because of federal immigration rules or financial roadblocks.

activities, said Arthur Cummins, the county's administrator for instructional services.

Among the strategies that officials put in place were classroom discussions on immigration, writing letters to policy-makers, on-campus protests, and encouraging that off-campus protests and demonstrations be scheduled during non-school hours.

Some officials attempted to "lock down" their schools to keep students from

participating, but Cummins said that was the least effective response.

In Fort Worth, Texas, a similar approach helped minimize school disruptions and the risk to students, said Deputy Superintendent Pat Linares. The goal was to refocus students' political outrage into an educational outlet.

"We felt it was critically important as educators that we have a responsibility to educate students in all aspects of life and to make sure we utilize any incident that

occurs [in the community] as a teachable moment," she said.

As in California, close cooperation among school officials, parents, Hispanic leaders, and the mayor's office helped get out the message that students should stay in school—and, if they wanted to protest, they should plan their activities for the weekend before the Monday, May 1 march.

It worked, she said. "We didn't have a single student out on Monday." ■

OTHER NEWS

Court battle looms over control of LAUSD

The battle for political control of the Los Angeles Unified School District is not yet over, despite Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's signing of legislation that gives partial control of the nation's second largest school system to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

As the *Urban Advocate* went to press, LAUSD school officials, the California School Boards Association, and other groups had filed suit challenging the legality of the state's action.

Passage of Assembly Bill 1381 violates the Los Angeles city charter, which grants the mayor no authority over the public schools, and is in conflict with provisions of the state Constitution that sets up school systems as separate government entities, claim plaintiffs in the lawsuit. The suit also argues the legislation disenfranchises the voting rights of voters and "impairs their right to elect the representatives of their choice."

"The lawsuit seeks to answer fundamental questions that many people have raised about AB 1381 since its inception," Superintendent Roy Romer said in a statement after the lawsuit was filed. "Before we disrupt our current reform efforts in our school communities, we need to have these questions answered."

For Villaraigosa, passage of AB 1381 was the culmination of a months-long, bitterly fought effort to win control of the 712,000-student school system. The bill's passage was only a partial victory for the mayor, however, as state lawmakers severely diluted Villaraigosa's original proposal that would have given him near-total control of the district.

The final legislation instead diluted the power of the elected school board in favor

of an appointed superintendent, who would be chosen by a council of mayors from the 26 cities within LAUSD. Villaraigosa would dominate the council as mayor of the largest city, and he would have direct control over LAUSD's three lowest-performing high schools and their feeder schools.

Unless some political arrangement is reached, the fight over school system's future could go on indefinitely. Both sides in the legal battle have vowed to take their fight all the way to the California Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, in mid-October, the board unanimously selected retired Navy Vice Adm. David L. Brewer III to replace Romer, who is retiring next summer. The board, which publicly spurned a request by Villaraigosa to have some say in the process, selected the non-educator after he impressed them with his intelligence, accomplishments, and leadership skills. Brewer, 60, who left the Navy in March, recently headed the Military Sealift Command, where he oversaw the supply chain for equipment, fuel, and ammunition for U.S. forces worldwide. He was in charge of more than 8,000 military and civilian personnel and about 120 ships.

Boston chooses Rivera as new schools chief

The Boston School Committee has selected Manuel J. Rivera, superintendent of the Rochester, N.Y., school system, to take the helm of the 57,000-student school system following the retirement of Thomas W. Payzant.

Named National Superintendent of the Year in April, Rivera has more than 30 years experience in public education. He announced plans to retire next year as

Rochester's superintendent and reportedly had turned down an offer to apply for the Boston position before changing his mind.

School committee Chair Elizabeth Reilinger, who co-chaired the search committee, expressed confidence in Rivera's selection. "We are impressed with Dr. Rivera's track record of setting high standards and ensuring that all students perform at high levels," she said. "During his tenure in Rochester, he has combined educational expertise with management skills to take that district to the next level, and we are confident that he will do the same here in Boston."

Meanwhile, the school district is celebrating winning The 2006 Broad Prize for Urban Education. Boston won the first CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence two years ago.

"The Boston Public Schools is committed to providing a top-quality education for all students," Reilinger said. "With a laser-like focus on improving teaching and learning and a dedication to training and supporting staff, schools across the city have demonstrated measurable improvements over the past few years. The Broad Prize is a recognition of those efforts and should be celebrated."

The Broad Prize is an annual award that honors large urban school districts that demonstrate the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps for poor and minority students. The money goes directly to graduating high school seniors for college scholarships.

As the winner of The Broad Prize, Boston Public Schools will receive \$500,000 in college scholarships, and the four finalists—Bridgeport Public Schools, Jersey City Public Schools, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, and the New York City Department of Education—will each receive \$125,000. ■

Philadelphia relies on instructional management system

When Philadelphia schools chief Paul Vallas speaks to an audience about how he's working to boost student achievement, he often points to the potential of a behind-the-scenes, seemingly wonkish initiative: the use of an instructional management system that brings together a well-crafted curriculum, a districtwide schedule of instruction, thoughtfully planned instructional aids, and the power of technology.

It's an approach that Vallas insists is a powerful tool for improving urban education: "If you standardize your curriculum models and put in place a high-standard instructional management system, you help improve the quality of instruction," he says. Such a system "can turn good teachers into great teachers, and inexperienced teachers into experienced teachers." Although coordinating all its components takes some work and planning, the basics of this effort are simple in theory. All you need:

1. A good curriculum: This is the foundation of any such initiative, says May Lou Fischer, Philadelphia's assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. The school district completely rewrote its curriculum in recent years to better align classroom instruction with academic standards measured by state assessments. Without this step, she says, it would be difficult to improve instruction—or measure its success—if what's being taught doesn't match what's being tested.

2. A districtwide instructional schedule with benchmark tests: At the elementary schools, instruction is organized into six-week cycles. After five weeks of instruction, students take informal benchmark tests that allow teachers to use the final week of the cycle for remediation or enrichment activities. Older grades operate under a 10-week cycle. This kind of schedule, along with regular testing, allows teachers to intervene earlier when students are in trouble academically, Fischer says. "Everything that goes on during that [final week of the cycle] is data-driven. The teachers never had that before. They never had the data. But it is valuable information ... to determine what kids



Teachers at Philadelphia's General George A. McCall Elementary School use their laptops to access the district's instructional management system during a faculty meeting.

learned and what they didn't learn."

Having the schedule operate on a districtwide basis also eases the negative impact of the school system's high student mobility rate, she says. Because every teacher in the district is teaching approximately the same lesson at approximately the same time, students switching schools have an easier time keeping up in their new classes.

3. Instructional management software: What makes the system work is that all information is available to teachers online, Fischer says. Teachers can look up the curriculum, review the district schedule, and receive timely results of benchmark tests.

"All of the data comes through this system," she says. "Every teacher can log on, get the data, and view the curriculum." Also on the districtwide network are classroom materials and lesson strategies, "best practices" from experienced teachers, and suggestions for making "cultural connections" with students and making lessons more relevant to their lives.

This year, the online system includes suggestions to help teachers integrate some lessons across subjects, Fischer says. For example, a science lesson on the weather could tie in to a math lesson by using weather data to create pie or graph charts.

"We connect the dots for them," she

says. "When you can [connect] lessons to a real-world issue, there's more learning. Students make the connection. It's not just silly old numbers they're learning, it's something that's real."

In total, the instructional management system has reached a sophisticated level—but it wasn't always so. Each feature has been added over time, and it's taken more than two years to connect every city school, partly because installation had to wait until schools' networks and wiring were updated. A gradual approach actually helped encourage widespread use of the system. "We only wanted to roll out one [feature] at a time," says Fischer, noting teachers can become overwhelmed when too many bells and whistles are offered all at once. "If you do too much, too fast, teachers don't tend to use anything."

Even today, there's more to be done, she says. For example, grade books and report card reports have yet to be integrated into the system. And, although more students are taking their benchmark tests online, this feature can still be expanded.

An instructional management system isn't the silver bullet that'll boost student achievement on its own. But, Fischer says, "I think it's working well. It's made a difference, and we're obviously much better off than where we were." ■

Norfolk wins CUBE Annual Award

Houston, Miami districts named as finalists for honor



Moments after winning the 2006 CUBE Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence, members of the school board in Norfolk Public Schools stand with plaques honoring their recognition. From right are Stephen W. Tonelson, board member; Ursula D. Rhodes, board vice chair; Brian Perkins, chair of the CUBE Steering Committee; Lillian P. Wright, board member; and Vincent Rhodes, clerk of the school board.

Norfolk Public Schools has been working to make itself a “world-class school system by the year 2010,” and CUBE recently recognized its progress by awarding the Virginia school system with its 2006 Annual Award for Urban School Board Excellence.

The Houston Independent School District and the Miami-Dade County Public Schools were selected as finalists for the award, which was presented Sept. 30 at the CUBE Annual Conference in Phoenix.

“This is an affirmation of all our hard work to improve the quality of teaching and learning for all ... and all means all,” Vice Chair Ursula Rhodes said in her acceptance remarks. She thanked her fellow board members for putting the needs of students first and congratulated Norfolk’s teachers and administrators for making the school system’s success possible.

“We have achieved great things,” Rhodes said. “But even greater accomplishments are on the horizon.”

The CUBE award, sponsored by McGraw-Hill Education, recognizes urban school districts for their leadership and efforts to improve student achievement,

narrow the achievement gap, and bring their diverse communities together. As the winner, Norfolk will receive \$5,000 for its student scholarship fund.

“These school boards take urban public school governance to the highest level,” said Brian Perkins, chair of CUBE’s Steering Committee and school board president of the New Haven, Conn., Schools. “The type of leadership demonstrated by these districts shapes the landscape of the urban public school by closing the achievement gap, engaging the community, and raising student achievement.”

The Norfolk schools have won increasing recognition in recent years for their progress in improving student achievement. In 2004-05, for example, 92 percent of all fifth-graders performed at or above grade level in writing, while 80 percent or more met state standards in English and math.

Students in all grades, including secondary schools, achieve at similarly high levels. Norfolk also has narrowed the achievement gap significantly among various student groups.

“There is an intense focus on student performance and data in Norfolk,” said Superintendent Stephen Jones. “The board has an unwavering commitment to

improving student achievement first and foremost.”

In recent years, the 36,000-student school district has built up its prekindergarten program, reduced class sizes in kindergarten through grade three, and adopted a literacy-based curriculum for elementary students. Struggling students can take advantage of special programs on Saturdays and before and after school.

The school system also has expanded more advanced and rigorous coursework in its high schools.

As a finalist, Houston was cited for its efforts to create a college-bound culture for its largely economically disadvantaged student population, a strong community involvement program, and its personalized efforts to get dropouts back in school.

Miami-Dade County was cited for its civic and community engagement efforts, as well as its efforts to raise student achievement.

Previous winners of the CUBE award include the Boston Public Schools (2004) and the School District of Hillsborough County, Fla. (2005). Finalists were selected by a panel of distinguished judges based on materials submitted by the school districts and independent follow-up research. ■