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Half-century later, are schools more separate or more equal?

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Mildred Wright saw only black faces in her school in Charlotte, North Carolina, when she began teaching in 1957. Back then, segregation was supposed to be on the way out.

The promise, it turns out, was never that black and white.

In 1954, the Supreme Court had declared that "separate but equal" schools were unconstitutional. Yet in Charlotte, desegregation was not truly enforced until the early 1970s. And it took a federal judge to make Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools the national example of urban busing for racial balance.

Since then, the trend has gone the other way, in Wright's district and nationwide.

Parents in Charlotte sued to stop the district from using race in determining where to assign children. The courts halted the desegregation order, saying the city's schools had ended the pattern of discrimination. Wright has watched integration start to wash away.

"I have grave concerns," said Wright, now the principal at Thomasboro Elementary, where grades are improving but most students are black.

"Children learn more from each other if they come from diverse backgrounds. If everyone is the same in every school, you don't know who's on the other side of town," said Wright, 69. "It's just like it was before."

On May 17, 1954, the high court's decision in the case that became known as Brown



AP PHOTO

Linda Brown Smith was a 3rd grader when her father started a class-action suit in 1951, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

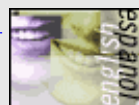


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v. Board of Education energized the civil rights movement and changed the way the country looked at itself.

The Supreme Court, ruling on combined cases from Topeka, Kansas, to Clarendon County, South Carolina, said schools separated on the basis of race were inherently unequal. This practice, the justices said, created a status of inferiority among minorities.

While legalized segregation is long gone, a new question is before the country: Does integration remain relevant in the drive to improve all schools?

Schools have not been as racially unbalanced since 1968, the start of a series of Supreme Court decisions that put muscle behind desegregation, said researcher Gary Orfield, co-director of The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.

Desegregation reached a high point in the late 1980s, but has since eroded, his research shows. Most white, black and Hispanic students still go to a school where they are in the racial or ethnic majority.

"The ultimate irony is that a lot of people in 2004 are talking about everything else but desegregation, and the country has resegregated many of its public schools," said Theodore Shaw, director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, which argued the Brown case in court.

Urban researcher John Logan says the lost progress since Brown has been overstated. Desegregation efforts have faltered since the early 1990s and racial imbalance remains large, but the gains of the 1960s and 1970s have not been broadly reversed, said Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center at the University at Albany in New York.

Across the United States, the step away from desegregation has resulted largely from court orders that school systems end cross-town busing and other attendance policies based on race.

Shaw and other desegregation advocates say slipping diversity does not mean schools are reverting to old ways.

“ Let's assume we're able to get separate but equal schools. Are we satisfied with that as a nation? Is that where we want to be? That's the question that is still on the table. ”

-- Theodore Shaw, director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund

Etta Martin-Lee's fourth-grade students cannot believe she has lived through such times. As a black girl in St. Louis, she was sent to a white school. Adults pelted her bus with bricks and spat tobacco juice on her as she entered the building.

Now 51 and a teacher at Dyer-Kelly Elementary in Sacramento, California, Martin-Lee leads a racially diverse class of students who have no concept of being limited by skin color.

"These children are me," she said. "These are the poor children of working parents. This is my calling. I am supposed to be

here working with these children. I am supposed to be here so they know there is something better now."

Many adults who went to school during peak desegregation years say the experience helped them shed stereotypes and form relationships across color lines, according to a study by the Teachers College at Columbia University and the University of California at Los Angeles.

Ron Lieberman, a white man who went to an integrated Dwight Morrow High School in Englewood, New Jersey, is one of those people.

A jewelry store owner, he said he is at ease with customers of all races and credits "a lot of that to my school, without a doubt."

But Lieberman, like many others interviewed in the study, found after graduation a world that was not nearly as integrated as the public schools they attended. And even in those schools, blacks often were placed in lower-level classes while whites made their way into the honors courses.

That was part of the reason the euphoria of the Brown decision faded for some blacks; they bore the burden of making it work and did not always get the academic benefits. Meanwhile, many black community schools closed.

"There was a feeling of loss," said Charles Clotfelter, a Duke University professor who has written a book on the rise and retreat of school desegregation. "Even though the old system was a segregated one, the feeling was desegregation had not come without its costs," he said.

Today, more than 80 percent of adults would prefer their child attend a racially mixed school, according to an Associated Press poll conducted by Ipsos-Public Affairs. The question remains what are people willing to do to make that happen when many housing patterns are not mixed.

Almost 80 percent of those polled also said they would rather their child attend the closest school, even if it mostly has one race, rather than attend an integrated school farther away. White adults were much more in favor of that point than blacks, who were split.

"It's naturally going to take society a while to integrate properly," said Joyce Haws, secretary of The National Association for Neighborhood Schools. "But when you try to force it and use school children to do it, then it becomes not desegregation, but social engineering. And that's where we went wrong," she said.

The message from Washington is not about the racial makeup of schools, but the quality of education regardless of where students live. The No Child Left Behind law of 2001 sets an expectation that all children will be at grade level in reading and math by 2014, a lofty goal given gaps in achievement between minorities and whites.

The law means minorities must do more than get in the door, as Brown required -- they also must get a quality education and more choices if they do not, said Education Secretary Rod Paige, a black man who grew up in segregation.

Many schools are struggling to meet the law's promises, which include top teachers in all core classes and yearly gains in test scores.

Desegregation plans continue to be the subject of court fights. Racial imbalance is particularly entrenched in cities; in the largest districts, seven in 10 students are not white.

"Let's assume we're able to get separate but equal schools. Are we satisfied with that as a nation? Is that where we want to be? That's the question that is still on the table," said Shaw, leader of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

"I understand black folks who say 'We ought to focus on resources,' because some of them are not going to have desegregated schools. And a lot of black folks are tired of chasing white people, and I understand that, too. But nothing in our experience as a nation teaches us that racial segregation is going to be something that's good for our children," Shaw said.

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