

Restore integrity of Brown v. Board



FIFTY YEARS after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down desegregation in the landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, America's schools and universities are struggling with the challenge of providing equal educational opportunity in an increasingly multi-cultural society.

Ironically, re-segregation has become prevalent in some school districts while at the university level affirmative-action programs, intended to produce greater educational opportunity for minorities, have lowered admissions standards. Both developments are compromising the original intent of *Brown*.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court declared that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal because they deprived black students of equal protection under the law. The *Brown* decision initiated a worthy struggle to desegregate the nation's public schools and spurred attempts to make college education accessible to a larger number of disadvantaged minorities. The intent was to create a more adequate education for minorities in a system that was governed by competent teaching, adequate facilities and rigorous standards.

While public education no longer suffers from the old separate-but-equal doctrine that once permitted racist institutional policies, successes have been mixed at best. Re-segregation has been on the rise since 1991. Recent polls indicate that white students, on average, attend schools that are 80 percent white, while just 14 percent of white students attend multi-racial schools.

Segregation is most severe in

COMMENTARY

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the nation's largest cities and the suburban districts surrounding them. A Harvard University report reveals that the majority of intensely segregated minority schools faces conditions of concentrated poverty and does not enjoy the same educational opportunities as white counterparts.

If re-segregation persists, we can't expect the current generation of students to understand the cultures, value systems and motivations of people from social backgrounds different from their own. The danger is that the same racial stereotypes that once plagued our society will become re-ingrained in the institutional fabric of our society as these students, in adulthood, assume their places as employees, voters and even public officials.

If the states were to implement standards-based reform, the courts would be able to measure what constitutes an adequate education. Once those reforms were implemented, the state would have a legal responsibility to ensure that schools have sufficient resources so that their students can meet the standards.

The *Brown* decision has also had an unintended effect on higher education. Affirmative-action plans, which were established to ensure equal educational opportunity for minorities, have compromised the integrity of the landmark decision. Those plans have diminished the quality of admissions standards that are so important to educational equality. Instead, federal guidelines intended to increase minority enrollment have resulted in the establish-

ment of a quota system.

Some colleges have adopted lower aptitude scores for minorities because of culturally biased standard achievement tests. These practices are inherently unfair to those minority students who gain admission, leaving them to wonder whether they're respected for their intellectual achievement.

Affirmative action has also had legal reverberations. White backlash has resulted in reverse-discrimination cases like the *University of California v. Allan Bakke* in 1978, while as recently as 2003 in two cases involving the University of Michigan, the court vetoed the use of race in undergraduate admissions but upheld race as a consideration in law school admissions.

Compromising the standards of admission, teaching and evaluation to justify the quota system will diminish student accountability, increase grade inflation and jeopardize the integrity of higher education itself. Perhaps the best alternative can be found in a colorblind system based on individual merit and enterprise. If any preference is to be given to a student, it should be on the basis of economic background.

Brown v. Board paved the way for significant opportunities in our society for both minorities and whites by ensuring equal justice, fairness and education. As a society, we can't afford to backtrack by allowing re-segregation in our public schools or the lowering of admissions standards in our colleges and universities. Only by rededicating themselves to *Brown* can our schools, universities and courts recover the legacy of that landmark decision.

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