

## **The Theater of Equity**

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### **Abstract**

*Despite multiple creative approaches to integrating Minnesota's segregated urban public schools, students of color in these schools remain the majority. The state's progressive, anti-racist sentiment toward education has not evolved into action on the part of White families, which leaves under-resourced urban districts struggling beneath a mere veneer of equity. Bernadeia Johnson, a former superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools, describes the trajectory of segregation in her state and the resistance that continues to prevent integration policies from becoming reality in the Minneapolis district.*

Nearly seven decades after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled school segregation illegal in *Brown v. Board of Education*, public schools remain severely segregated. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that among the country's eighth graders, 69.2% of Black children attend a school where the majority are students of color, while only 12.9% of White children do (Garcia, 2020). In Minnesota, where I formerly served as superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools, the trend toward racially segregated schools has skyrocketed over the past 20 years. In 1998, five schools in Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area remained wholly segregated, with a 98%+ enrollment of students of color. By 2018, that number had grown to 39. In the same time period, the number of intensely segregated schools where more than 90% of students are children of color increased from 21 to 102 (Stancil, 2020).

This trend follows a string of Supreme Court decisions in the 1990s that made it easier for school districts to free themselves from court oversight of their desegregation programs. Bit by bit, districts across the country were emboldened to dismiss integration, including Minneapolis, which had previously boasted the nation's "most effective pro-integrative fair housing policy" that by 1991 had resulted in zero non-White segregated schools across the state (Orfield & Luce, 2014). During my superintendent term in the Minneapolis School District, we were on the front lines of addressing the impacts of this persistent resegregation. Our model of the intersecting challenges that block equal access to effective instruction was our roadmap for solving them (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2019a).

Many of the compounding challenges in the Minneapolis district and the state at large share a common thread. While Minnesota is often considered a bastion of progressive, prosocial policies, we too often see "pro-equity" stances limited to just that—good-sounding claims that do not manifest in action. I have observed that when presented with opportunities to make a change that would improve educational opportunities for students of color and benefit White students through diversity, many self-proclaimed anti-racist White parents turn and retreat. Our metropolitan area resounds with pro-equity talk, official statements, and support for equity-minded school boards

and leaders but lacks a cooperative effort. The scripts are strong, and their lines are delivered with heart, but there is no third act in this scenario. Instead of action and resolution, the build-up sinks back to the status quo. I call this build-up the theater of equity.

An explanation that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak does not apply; I believe the spirit is not willing enough. We will not progress until we start to have open conversations about race, what we believe as a community, and how we think about and act upon our liberalism. School integration is core to the health of our society, economy, and democracy. We know that White students who attend integrated schools carry less racial prejudice and are better prepared to live and work in our multiracial society. Young adults with a background in integrated education are more inclined to settle in diverse neighborhoods after graduating and, nurtured with a deeper understanding of other races, can better function and thrive in diverse workplaces (McArdle & Acevedo-Garcia, 2017). In contrast, students of color isolated in racially segregated schools that funnel into high-poverty areas have less access to challenging and advanced curriculums, adequate resources, and experienced teachers (Hobday et al., 2009). These schools have lower graduation rates and further disadvantage these historically underserved students with high teacher turnover and buildings needing updates and repair. However, when students of color receive an education in integrated schools, they have higher graduation rates, career goals, college attendance rates, and incomes (Hobday et al., 2009).

For equity to become a reality in our schools, we must carry out anti-racist work on both the personal and organizational levels. We have seen the transformation that comes from individual work on racial awareness, but inner evolution alone cannot fix school segregation or other inequities. Racially aware people must take action. Much of the work we did in the Minneapolis Public Schools district, in which 54% of students come from low-income homes and 19% are English learners (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2021a & 2019b), was dismantling structural racism. Among the approaches originating during my term from 2010 to 2015 involved reducing pre-K through 2nd-grade suspensions by 50%. We accomplished this by placing a moratorium on non-violent suspensions for this age group (BMTM, 2014). We needed to change a system where a kindergarten teacher could demand the suspension of a five-year-old student of color for throwing a child-sized chair, thereby making her feel “unsafe.” We took a hard look at the data about all school discipline and changed our practices to decrease the number of suspensions that fell upon a disproportionate number of students of color. Today, fewer students of color are deprived of weeks of learning for committing the same behavior that a White student can exhibit without repercussions.

We also designed a new teacher and principal evaluation system to target professional development more effectively. When the research proves time and again that strong student-teacher relationships are the most crucial element of learning (Sparks, 2019), our teachers need the skills to create those relationships. The district’s recent research comparing students’ and teachers’

perspectives on social-emotional behaviors confirmed what we suspected about the ongoing student-teacher disconnect. However, the extent of that misalignment was surprising (Minneapolis Public Schools Accountability, Research, and Equity Division, 2020). Responses about relationship skills (e.g., respecting a classmate's opinion; having fun with a classmate) and self-management skills (being prepared for school; completing a hard task) revealed that White teachers consistently overestimate White students' skills and underestimate the skills of students of color. In the Minneapolis district, 67% of our teachers are White, while 65% of our students are children of color (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2021b). During my tenure, we addressed these belief gaps by including training in culturally relevant teaching in our professional development work based on what we learned from our teacher evaluations. We introduced Ethnic Studies for 9th-grade students in our highly diverse district in which 37% of students are White, 34% Black, 17% Hispanic/Latino; 5% Asian, 3% American Indian, and 6% two or more races (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2021b). We tackled the Black male opportunity gap by creating the Office of Black Male Student Achievement with a team dedicated to solving their specific challenges. The office has expanded to serve Black Female students and was renamed the Office of Black Student Achievement (Minneapolis Public Schools Office of Black Student Achievement, n.d.).

These actions and others disrupt inequities at the root level by transforming the systems that have disenfranchised students of color for decades. In terms of trying to integrate our schools, our most traditional approach involved bussing students of color to schools in White neighborhoods. We learned that regardless of the high-quality curriculum and abundant resources in an affluent, predominantly White high school in the southwest section of the district, many Black students from North Minneapolis could not achieve, let alone thrive. Many Black students ultimately returned to their original school due to the suburban teachers' low expectations of their abilities, a generally hostile school environment that alienated and created a dehumanizing experience for them, and an inability to engage in extracurricular activities because the bus left at 3:00.

For example, in a scenario we have witnessed multiple times, a Black student may have been at the top of their class in their neighborhood school, but at a suburban school, they are the only Black student in most of their classes. As a result, they might begin to internalize a message of inferiority when routinely ignored and assumed to be less capable than their White peers. Most classmates and teachers avoid them. Rather than feeling motivated to develop more rigorous skills, this student feels rejected, dejected, and not valued. Why would this student want to stay? The suburban school may have accepted this Black student, but it did not examine or try to improve how its teachers, students, and systems responded to their presence. They did not do the work before, during, or after integration but instead settled for a façade of equity.

When we look at parent satisfaction surveys, Black families who stay in underperforming schools are comfortable there, with 88% rating their child's school environment as free from hate speech and prejudice (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2018). It all comes down to relationships—parents

feel their kids are accepted in their majority-student-of-color schools. The positive social-emotional experience is too valuable to sacrifice by sending them to a school that raises the bar academically, so they keep their children in the neighborhood school that lacks experienced teachers and critical resources. Even the strongest student-teacher relationships cannot significantly raise achievement if the fundamentals for schooling, especially the effective core instruction critical in the earliest grades, are missing. For example, first-grade students who do not receive a solid foundation in phonemic awareness and other skills essential to reading development are already behind. In the ensuing years, many resources are spent getting these students on track with remedial programs.

One of our integration strategies in Minneapolis began with studying the district map and launching magnet schools in a centralized area that would appeal to all families. When we interviewed families, they said they would travel to achieve integration if their travel time was 15 minutes less than their current school commute. Regrettably, according to lower-than-anticipated White student enrollment, we are witnessing that many White families' stated values do not align with their actions. The district continues to engage with people in door-to-door talks to talk about the benefits of integration for all students and families.

In Minneapolis and elsewhere, so-called integrated schools are highly segregated inside the building. In wealthier integrated schools, the top floor will hold advanced placement classes, and the floor beneath it will house a high-tech library and labs. The farther down, the darker the students—main floor classrooms are filled with students of color. The special education students, most of whom are students of color, are assigned the worst spaces, typically in the basement. When those spaces get tight, principals bump the students to other schools rather than make room in other parts of the building. Some of these schools bring in enough students of color to qualify for Title I funds. However, their student data reveal that the extra integration dollars are not used to provide equitable opportunities for students of color to learn. While their websites proudly put their diversity front and center, these schools avoid doing equity work.

The history of public education in the United States is clear about the origins of systemic racism that are still responsible for our wide opportunity gaps. An economy that relied on low-cost Black and Latino laborers had no incentive to offer those workers an education that would expand their options and lift them from the onion and cotton fields (Perea, 2004). Communities could not block workers' children from schoolrooms forever, however. As education scholar Meyer Weinberg (1977) wrote, "When it proved impossible to continue withholding instruction from the descendants of the conquered, the schools grudgingly offered them the merest taste of education" (p. 140). The country has consciously and unconsciously inherited this resistant stance on educating people of color. This includes Minneapolis, where we talk a good game about educational equity yet offer only a taste of integration.

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