

# The Detroit News

## ***BROWN VS. THE BOARD OF EDUCATION***

### **Freedom demands school choice**

By Neal McCluskey

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Sixty years ago, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared an end to segregation in American public schools. It was a crucial victory for freedom, but the battle is not over. It won't be until all people can freely choose how their children are educated.

The crying need for *Brown* was clear: a nation could not be free if children were assigned to schools based on their race. Tearing down such apartheid was imperative.

That said, while de jure segregation is gone, black academic achievement has been halting. Indeed, 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress results released just last week showed only 7 percent of African-Americans scoring "proficient" in mathematics, versus 33 percent of whites. In reading, the difference was 16 percent to 47 percent.

Given such frustrating results, it should come as little surprise that African Americans overwhelmingly want the power to choose private schools, not just have access, though hard won, to public schools based largely on where they can buy a home. A 2011 Harvard University poll found that 67 percent of African Americans favor expanding choice with "universal vouchers," and 80 percent support "tax credit-funded scholarships" for low-income students.

But wouldn't universal choice foster balkanization, threatening the social unity public schools are supposed to promote, and most Americans desire?

It may indeed lead to greater sorting, at least in the short term, but the evidence suggests that you simply cannot engineer unity from above, no matter how desirable. It must come from the bottom up.

This point was painfully driven home as enforcement of *Brown* evolved from eliminating mandated segregation to imposing integration through such methods as forced busing. Research suggests that pushing people physically together did little to build bonds between them, while the compulsion often ignited resentment and even physical conflict. It also spurred infamous "white flight." Perhaps that's why surveys consistently show that most Americans

support the idea of integration, but have serious concerns about specific measures to achieve it.

Moving beyond race, it is clear that public schools foster all kinds of inherently divisive conflicts. For much of our history, religion was the biggest battleground, especially pitting Roman Catholics against Protestants. The tension was greatly relieved when Roman Catholics established their own schools.

Today, whether it is over prayer, teaching the Bible, or evolution versus creationism, religious skirmishes are pervasive. But the feuding doesn't end there. People are also consumed with battles over reading assignments that contain sexual scenes, derogatory words, or violence; fights over student speech; curricular throwdowns over everything from American history to the Common Core; and on and on.

Again, more freedom is the solution.

For one thing, a system in which money is attached to children and educators are free to establish autonomous schools simply avoids much conflict, enabling diverse people to choose what they want rather than having to engage in political warfare to control a district or state.

But choice does more than just defuse conflict. By enabling people to come together based on mutual interests and desires, it lays the groundwork for real unity.

This is the underlying idea behind magnet schools, public schools with special focuses such as science or the arts. Magnets were primarily established in the wake of the busing battles as a voluntary means to promote integration, encouraging children of all races to come together through a shared desire for a specific curricular focus.

Unfortunately, because they are public schools, magnets are limited in what they can provide. So, too, are charter schools. In particular, they can have no religious affiliation, and they only exist if government permits them. Private schools can offer much more variety, including concrete religious or other norms, and they do not need to go through a political process to be established.

Some research suggests that private schools do, indeed, tend to foster greater substantive racial integration – building of bonds between people of different groups – than public schools. Why? Likely because the bonding power of shared values or interests are better able to overcome racial distance than simply being in the same school building.

Brown was a crucial step toward unity and full freedom that we should celebrate. There is, however, still more to do.

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