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Segregation and the School Choice Movement

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America is, rightly, having a reckoning on race. The nation's history is scarred by its too-often horrific mistreatment of African Americans, from slavery, to Jim Crow, to discriminatory government housing policies that lasted into the 1960s. Righteous indignation can, and should, well up in one's heart. Progress, though, depends on understanding that there are good people who see the same problems, but not the same solutions. It requires operating with the starting assumption that even those on opposite sides of the policy debate are animated by good intentions.

Journalist Amanda Ripley wrote [an excellent article](#) recently aimed at helping journalists cover controversial issues in our sharply divided society. After speaking with the likes of *Righteous Mind* author Jonathan Haidt, Ripley concluded that the key to productive interaction is to get to know your ideological opponents—learn about who they are, and why they believe what they believe—and to wrestle with their experiences and beliefs. Doing so often reveals our opponents to be decent human beings, and complexity—seeing the nuances of what they believe—causes us to “become more curious and less closed off to new information.”

It can often turn out that those with whom we disagree, even vehemently, also want to serve justice. But how they see justice is different.

Which brings us to “[Segregationists, Libertarians, and the Modern ‘School Choice’ Movement](#),” a recent article by Steve Suits of the Southern Education Foundation. Suits asserts that school choice supporters are at best “indifferent” to school segregation, and cynically promote choice by invoking civil rights. Suits ties choice supporters directly to Southern segregationists who, following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision requiring public school desegregation, advocated for choice so whites could attend private “segregation academies.”

I have struggled with how to respond to Suits, and contemplated a blistering condemnation. But indignation over injustice, which Suits expresses, is normal, and he is absolutely correct that there has been great injustice inflicted on African Americans. Rather than try to satisfy my immediate urges and pummel Suits with acidic attacks on his character and blind spots, my hope instead is to present and explain the *good* motives I believe animate many school choice supporters—the justice-seeking motives—hopefully advancing the kind of understanding approach to political debate that can contribute to real progress.

The Principle

The bulk of Suits' condemnation of school choice is grounded in the fact that some segregationists offered arguments for choice couched in the same terms as current choice supporters. These include appeals to freedom of association, invoking the power of competition

among schools, and religious freedom. All of these can be seen as laudable—even essential—principles. Indeed, Suits recognizes that the principles invoked by many choice supporters are generally considered good. “What could be more American than the freedom of parents to choose their children’s schools—public or private—with public financial support,” he writes.

Accepting that the principles invoked are not themselves inherently bad, and assuming our goal is to get to workable solutions to social problems and avoid poisonous demonization, then the root question is, if people invoke laudable principles for bad ends, do those principles suddenly become bad? Logically, the answer is “no.”

If the principles themselves do not cease to be good even when they are used for ill, then it cannot be the case, as Suits suggests, that anyone who invokes those principles must be at best “indifferent” to bad things that happen under them, any more than saying we need water for all automatically makes one indifferent to drowning. One *could* be indifferent, but one could also truly believe that the good of upholding such basic principles as freedom of association—government cannot tell you with whom you must live, or socialize, thus controlling basic personal decisions—outweighs the good of compensating for past government violations of that freedom with the flip side of forced integration. This is not to say that there are not good, maybe even superior, arguments for government-influenced integration in the face of centuries of forced segregation, only that it is unfair to assume that anyone who upholds a good principle must be, at best, indifferent to bad things that happen under it. Indeed, some may believe—myself included—that upholding freedom is important to achieving real, sustainable, and highly desired racial integration.

Milton Friedman

To a significant extent, Suits makes economist Milton Friedman the exemplar of indifferent school choice advocates. Suits focuses on the arguments in Friedman’s seminal 1955 essay “The Role of Government in Education,” which called for separating government funding of education from its provision by letting families choose private schools with vouchers. Looking at Friedman’s essay, including its lengthy footnote about the burgeoning use of school choice to dodge desegregation, Suits declares that Friedman “was at best agnostic about segregation,” and that he “never joined forces with segregationists, but he remained indifferent about how his libertarian arguments aided their strategies.”

This seems unfair to Friedman. Though it’s impossible to know for sure what is in anyone’s heart, it is possible to know what Friedman wrote. He not only condemned forced segregation, he argued in favor of voluntary racial integration on both principled and practical grounds. As Suits himself acknowledges, in the 1955 essay Friedman “assured readers that he deplored segregation and racial prejudice.” Indeed, Friedman made it clear in his footnote that while he favored government letting people freely decide with whom they attended school, if choosing between forced segregation and forced integration, he would select integration. But in keeping with seeing freedom of association as essential, Friedman wrote that “the appropriate activity for those who oppose segregation and racial prejudice is to try to persuade others of their view.”

It is also inaccurate to assert that after writing “The Role of Government in Education” Friedman expressed indifference about segregation. Friedman essentially rehashed his school choice arguments in his 1962 book *Capitalism and Freedom*, and in the body of the text reiterated his opposition to segregation. He wrote that “we should all of us, insofar as we possibly can, try by

behavior and speech to foster the growth of attitudes and opinions that would lead mixed schools to become the rule and segregated schools the rare exceptions.”

Going beyond saying supportive things about integration, Friedman argued that choice would be *more* likely to achieve integration and harmony than public schooling, stating in a 1976 article that rather than “increase racial and class separation in schools, exacerbate racial conflict and foster an increasingly segregated and hierarchal society...nothing could do more to moderate racial conflict and to promote a society in which black and white cooperate in joint objectives, while respecting each other’s separate rights and interests.” This is consistent with “Contact Theory,” propounded in 1954 by Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport. That theory argues that interpersonal contact among people of different groups is crucial to building bridges among those groups. To be successful, the theory says, such contact must be “in pursuit of common goals” and occur with all groups in a situation of “equal status.” These provisos are more consistent with voluntary contact than coerced, with no built-in assumption that one group needs the help of the other, and no school assignment that feels like a zero-sum contest.

In hindsight we know how staunchly many people and governments resisted desegregation, making it easier to criticize Friedman’s stance. But we also know that civil rights advocates often disagreed amongst themselves about the best approaches to achieve their shared goals. Advocating different strategies, especially given the highly contentious reality of desegregation, does not reveal that someone is indifferent to racism or injustice.

Reality

Many people support school choice not only out of principle, but based on historical and present reality: public schooling has repeatedly produced repression, exclusion, and other chronic problems. Just as most choice supporters may well support choice for good reasons, likely, too, so do public schooling defenders. Most, no doubt, believe that equality and unity are best served by everyone having common schools, and they deplore abuses. But support for school choice must be seen in the context of public schooling reality, an often ugly one that Suitts almost completely ignores.

Public schooling—a system of government-run and funded schooling—was created and justified, in large part, to build attachments to the state. For some, this alone sounds loud alarms. Government deciding what children should know, and what they should value and be attached to, could too easily subject children’s minds to primarily government approved thought. There are understandable arguments for this, and they were especially salient in the early United States, when common schooling gained many adherents: we had a new country, which itself was a loose affiliation of states, and large-scale government “by the people” was an idea with historical precedent for failure. It was not unreasonable to desire a common education system to bring everyone together.

Alas, coercive efforts to impose uniformity were not just theoretical fears. The first major push for school choice, mention of which Suitts relegates to a single sentence in a footnote, was by Roman Catholics, who wanted to use tax money to educate their children in their own schools rather than the public schools that were not only often *de facto* Protestant, but sometimes openly attacked Catholics. This spurred creation of a parochial school system that at its 1965 peak enrolled about 5.5 million children. Attacks on Catholics reached their apogee in 1922, when

Oregon passed a law essentially outlawing private schooling, a measure for which the Ku Klux Klan—which was virulently anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish, as well as racist—crusaded.

Suits ignores this, not mentioning the Klan's animus toward private schooling, and especially Catholics, at all. Indeed, he only mentions the *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* Supreme Court case—which, in striking the Oregon law down, famously pronounced that a child is not a “mere creature of the state”—in order to critique school choice. He notes that segregationist Fortney Johnston invoked a part of the *Pierce* ruling to justify his choice proposal.

It was not just Klan members who wished to use public schooling to force Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture and ideas on others. Ellwood Cubberley, a leading thinker in education policy in the early twentieth century, called for public schooling to transform immigrant communities, whether they liked it or not. In 1909, writing about the influx of non-“Anglo-Teutonic” peoples, Cubberley wrote:

Everywhere these people tend to settle in groups of settlements, and to set up their national manners, customs, and observances. Our task is to break up these groups of settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children, as far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth.

More directly related to Suits' concern was not the frequently hostile or belittling treatment of Roman Catholics and other minorities whom public schooling allowed in, but its treatment of those it for so long excluded. After some states made teaching African-Americans illegal before the Civil War, when they finally permitted black people to access education they *required* segregation. This was unquestionably a far wider, longer, and deeper infliction of harm than “segregation academies,” yet choice opponents such as Suits want public schooling to “win.”

Today, we continue to see what could be viewed as massive Anglo-centrism and inequality in public schooling, whether it is hugely segregated housing and, thus, public schooling, curricula that ignore or downplay minority groups, major underrepresentation of African Americans in the teaching force, or other inequalities. Which gets to the support of choice which most powerfully undermines an assumption of “indifference” to segregation: African-Americans tend to be strong supporters of choice. Surveys have repeatedly revealed majority or plurality African-American support for school choice, and almost always support outpacing the general public.

The first reason for this support is likely that African Americans tend to be in the public schools with the worst outcomes. But that is not the only reason. There have long been some African Americans who have wanted schools in which they are the majority and, hence, they have control. Some explicitly want schools with Afrocentric cultures and curricula. Some just want schools where their children will feel comfortable, and they do not believe they will feel that way in schools in which they are a minority. Finally, the ultimate empowerment is liberty—the ability to make decisions for oneself—not government force either excluding you from, or assigning you to, a school directly or indirectly based on your race. All of these things likely help to explain why some school choice supporters disapprovingly cited by Suits—including African Americans Senator Tim Scott, Republican of South Carolina, and Martin Luther King III—refer to school choice as a civil rights issue.

Finally, research hints that, in keeping with the theory of Allport and Friedman, American school choice programs have a small but positive integrating effect. There is also research that suggests that private schools have better racial climates after adjusting for racial student body make-up. They have fewer racial tensions and greater “bridging” among children of different races.

A Call for Respectful Discussion

Contemplating the injustice perpetrated against African Americans for so much of American history rightly elicits feelings of indignation. But if we let that understandable anger control how we approach not just social and political issues, but how we feel and talk about people with different ideas for seeking justice, we will not only unfairly demonize others, we will make it much harder to find sustainable ways to address injustice’s lasting effects.

I hope that readers will understand how someone with good intentions could support the principles that many—including, yes, some segregationists—have invoked to advance school choice, and will proceed in this debate by assuming that choice supporters, unless they offer compelling evidence otherwise, seek just outcomes. Then let us have a discussion in which we listen with open minds and seek solutions.

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