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Beyond Desegregation

By Fawn Johnson

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By law, schools aren't segregated. In reality, many are. "Education policy is a housing policy," says Economic Policy Institute Research Associate Richard Rothstein in a new paper published to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark desegregation ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*.

"*Brown* was unsuccessful in its purported mission," Rothstein writes. Today, black students generally attend schools where only 29 percent of their fellow students are white, down from 36 percent in 1980. (He also notes that in 1954, the percentage was zero in Southern states. So something has changed.)

Rothstein goes on to say that without desegregating neighborhoods, we can't desegregate schools. As a liberal thinker, one of Rothstein's preferred solutions is to aggressively enforce a new rule from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to require municipalities, white suburbs included, to integrate. Conservatives and libertarians blanch at such an idea, but there may be other ways to address a problem that neither Republicans nor Democrats can deny. The libertarian Cato Institute's Neal McCluskey suggests greatly expanding school choice, an idea supported by the vast majority of African Americans.

You don't need me to cite all the stories that I'm about to cite to see the obvious: White students and minorities don't go to school together. It's not because it isn't allowed. It's because they don't live in the same places. Segregation no longer occurs by race, but by zip code, writes Peg Tyre, strategy director at the advocacy group Edwin Gould Foundation.

"There are places where you can look, including New York City, where blocks away students are separated by economic status," said New York State Education Commissioner John King in a speech last week.

The country has changed so much since 1954 that drawing comparisons from that time ignores important demographic shifts, such as the rapid growth in the Latino population, according to the

authors of a new report from the Civil Rights Project/Proyeto Derechos Civiles at the University of California. They point out that black and Hispanic students tend to collect together in schools with a substantial majority of poor children. White and Asian students tend to collect together in schools with a substantial majority of middle-class children. "Black and Latino students have especially low exposure to white students in largest metropolitan areas and in midsize central cities," the report says. "This means that these students face almost total isolation not only from white and Asian students but also from middle class peers as well."

It should be no surprise, then, that these clusters of poor and minority-heavy schools cause big achievement gaps. Poor schools don't have the same resources as rich schools, and kids from poor families need considerably more help in school than those from middle-class families. Here's what happens next. The most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that the math and reading proficiency rates of twelfth-grade black and Hispanic students are about one-third that of their white classmates.

The problem, as it turns out, is far more difficult to solve than changing the law.

For our insiders: What is the legacy of *Brown* and how can modern communities honor it? Can integration occur organically, or is some kind of government muscle needed? How has the massive growth in the Hispanic population changed the equation? What are the societal impacts of rich/poor and minority/white clusters in schools?