

1996

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## Recommended Citation

Clark, Kenneth B., "Beyond Brown v. Board of Education: Housing and Education in the Year 2000" (1996). *Minnesota Law Review*. 1751.

<https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/mlr/1751>

## Beyond *Brown v. Board of Education*: Housing and Education in the Year 2000

Kenneth B. Clark\*

The Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>1</sup> spawned a collective hope and dream for an end to racial segregation in American public schools. I joined in the optimism. I spoke and wrote buoyantly,<sup>2</sup> confident in our future. At the time, I believed there would be positive changes within a decade or more. I thought that I, and the small group of like-minded persons with whom I worked, successfully would raise these issues, combat all signs of segregation, and remain persistent in opposing racism in our local schools. Although I knew of the *de facto* pattern of segregation that existed at that time in the New York City public school system, I thought the problem of segregation essentially was a Southern problem. I now confess this was naive. I recall being oblivious of the extent to which the board of education and school officials, including the commissioner of education, had developed curious subtle and covert social maneuvers for maintaining segregated schools in

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1. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

2. See, e.g., DARK GHETTO: DILEMMAS OF SOCIAL POWER (2d ed. 1989) (recounting life in urban ghettos in the 1960s); *Introduction to Symposium, Desegregation in the Public Schools*, 2 SOC. PROBS. 197, 197-98 (1955) (discussing social scientists' role in facilitating the process of desegregation); *The Desegregation Cases: Criticism of the Social Scientist's Role*, 5 VILL. L. REV. 224 (1959) (examining the arguments of some of the leading critics on the social scientist's role in school desegregation cases); *Current Trends in Desegregation*, AM. CHILD, Nov. 1954, at 1, 4 (discussing how communities affected by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision were dealing with desegregation of schools); *More Effective Techniques, in What Next? Five Negro Leaders Reply*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 29, 1963 (Magazine), at 27, 91 (urging blacks to go beyond public civil rights marches and demonstrations and to join together in actively exerting pressure on the government, businesses, labor organizations, financial and other like institutions, ultimately to eliminate any and all forms of racial injustice); *The Negro Is Tired of Waiting*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., June 10, 1963, at 38 (responding in an interview to questions regarding "the growing militancy of Negroes in the North").

New York City. As a social psychologist, I can say now that wishful thinking colored my ideas and beliefs. I did not realize how deeply endemic racism was in the American culture.

At that time, the North rationalized its racism by contending that racially segregated schools were a manifestation of a larger pattern of our racial culture. Segregation in housing patterns and racially segregated communities created segregated schools. I thought that taking important steps in modifying the racial housing pattern would address the segregated housing problem. This, in turn, would resolve the reorganization of our public school system seriously and successfully. I did not understand, however, that the maintenance of segregated housing not only excused persistent patterns of school segregation, but that segregated housing itself represented a form of deeply embedded racism that resisted all attempts at desegregation—ironically, particularly in the North. I was perplexed. Thus, while in writings and speeches I highlighted the gains in our society, such as the civil rights gains, affirmative action, and the increasing numbers of elected black political officials—very important developments—I underestimated the significance of racism's staunch hold on the American people.

Recent developments have made me reflect on the early stages following the Court's *Brown* decision. I now see more clearly the curious way that our early optimism prevented us from anticipating how racial progress would result in a form of backlash. The current resistance to affirmative action, for example, reflects the depth of American racism. We now are confronted with various manifestations of the belief that affirmative action essentially represents a rejection of or penalty against white males. This argument, however, conceals the fact that affirmative action was designed to remedy the past rejection, prejudice, and exclusion of minorities, particularly blacks. It is disheartening to see that these attempts to remedy social injustices now are being used to maintain those prior injustices.

As another example, segregated schools and segregated housing still pervade the American landscape, but they are not being discussed as manifestations of racism. Similarly, desegregation and integration are not being discussed as attempts to resolve former and persistent forms of injustice. Instead, these issues are discussed as issues of poverty and choice rather than as lasting symbols of our history of racism. Significantly, many liberals and many Supreme Court decisions now follow this

pattern of racial exclusion. In fact, institutions of higher learning explain racial isolation in terms of beneficial conditions for blacks in general, despite the earlier beliefs that segregation not only damaged black children, but also interfered with the human growth and development of white children. I am particularly fascinated by the fact that some blacks approve of segregated living quarters and segregated communities. The rise of the black separatist movement in the 1960s manifested blacks' identification with the reasoning of their oppressor. Black separatists internalized the reasoning of the proponents of racial separation.

It is clear to me, however, that the failure to desegregate our schools at all levels—at the elementary, high school, and college levels—despite our awareness of the harm that segregation inflicted on all of our children, has demoralized our society. It has weakened our social fabric. Yet we are being told that segregated schools and segregated housing in ghettos are not only desirable, but that blacks should feel grateful.

I often wonder how Thurgood Marshall and Robert Carter would present their case today before the present Supreme Court. How would they cope with the present pattern of resegregation that so pervades our society? As one of the social scientists who worked with Marshall and Carter during the *Brown* cases, I would argue that segregation, not only in Clarendon County, South Carolina, but also in New York City, in the Twin Cities, and in America at large, is as damaging now as it was then. The dream so long deferred should be re-examined, but not because the premise of the *Brown* decision has changed. The Supreme Court in *Brown* said: "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."<sup>3</sup> Earlier, the Court noted: "To separate [black students] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."<sup>4</sup> Those words still ring true today.

In the forty years since those statements, we have seen copious examples of the harm inflicted upon our society by the

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3. *Brown*, 347 U.S. at 495.

4. *Id.* at 494.

racism onto which we have held. It is time that educators, who have been dormant for so long, assume their role as leaders in this campaign for justice. Educators can become crucial participants in helping society protect our children and protect itself from the persistent damage of racism and segregation. Our schools, our neighborhoods, and, in fact, our society as a whole must be mobilized. We cannot apologize about freeing ourselves from the damage that is being done to our children and to the very fabric of our society. Our society desperately needs rejuvenation and a renaissance of positive and constructive policies by which we can all become constructive partners.