



Promoting Diversity and Understanding Starts in Our Schools

We've come a long way since the "separate but equal" doctrine was overturned in the historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision 60 years ago. But we have a long way to go.

At the time of the decision, only half of all Americans expressed support for integrated schools and in several states National Guard units were mobilized to block protesters of desegregation. In the years that followed, the courts and lawmakers approved steps to encourage diversity by, among other moves, approving busing strategies and prohibiting discrimination of students with mental or physical impairments. School integration for black students peaked in 1988 with nearly 45 percent of black students attending majority-white schools.

Court rulings in the early 1990s began limiting desegregation efforts while the Latino population expanded and suburban schools grew. By 2011, only 23 percent of black students attended white-majority schools even though white students are now more likely to attend racially diverse schools.

Today, one in three Milwaukee Public School students attends a school that is considered intensely segregated — up from one in eight students 20 years ago.

According to the Associated Press, "Civil rights data recently released by the Education Department showed glaring disparities remain in all aspects of education. Among the findings: minority students are less likely to have access to advanced

math and science classes, and to have new teachers. Black students of any age — even preschoolers — are more likely to be suspended. And, there continue to be gaps between the performance on national assessments between whites and black and Hispanic students, with whites scoring higher."

Schools in which students are highly racially isolated — even those with high levels of poverty — can and do achieve. But our democracy and our economy will be much stronger if we find ways to promote diversity and understanding, and ensure that every student has a quality education with meaningful enrichment opportunities.

Locally elected school boards need to lead the way. We have an obligation to the children of this state to stand up for public education and advocate for the resources and policies we need to do the job right in every school district.

We face challenges as student poverty rates continue to climb. In the 2013-14 school year, 43.3 percent of students were eligible for free and reduced-price meal eligibility — a nearly 14 percent increase over the past 10 years. The links between poverty, hunger and lower academic achievement are well known.

Today, despite the lack of compelling evidence that vouchers have improved student achievement, efforts are under way to continue expanding vouchers and privately run charters throughout the state. Unfortunately, these initiatives may contribute to segregation, especially among disabled students, and diminish efforts to

ensure that every student has a great public school no matter where they live or what their circumstances are.

Voucher advocates are fond of arguing that we need more "choices" in publicly funded education. What we need is to ensure that there are great public schools in every community that any parent would be happy to send their children to, and that meet the needs of local families. Because, in truth, students and parents don't really have a choice at all if our local *public* school is not a high-quality option.

Public school leaders need to celebrate our successes — such as the recent improvement in high school graduation rates, but we also must help the public understand the ramifications of turning the K-12 education system over to the private sector with little to no public accountability for meeting the needs of all learners.

We've fought hard in this nation to try to end the two-tiered education system that the *Brown* decision ruled as unconstitutional. We need to keep moving forward, promoting ways to lift all students up and preventing a return to the days of "separate but equal."

At a small ceremony commemorating the *Brown* decision at a Milwaukee school in May, a fifth-grade student offered her opinion, "What I like about being at a diverse school is that I get to see people from different backgrounds, learn about their personalities, learn about acceptance." Well said. ■

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