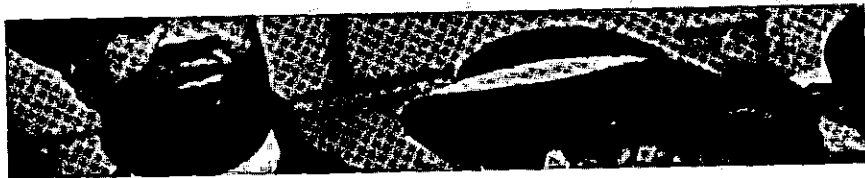


# MORE THAN ONE STRUGGLE

THE EVOLUTION OF  
BLACK SCHOOL REFORM IN MILWAUKEE

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## CONCLUSION

### RETHINKING HISTORY AND POLICY IN THE POST-BROWN ERA



As the nation prepares to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, the current status of black school reform appears to be very confusing. School desegregation policies that took more than a generation to achieve now are being partly rolled back in cities like Milwaukee, and several leading black activists are advocating for neighborhood schools, African American immersion education, or private school vouchers. Similar trends in desegregation politics have also appeared in other Northern and Western cities (such as Buffalo, Cleveland, and Denver) and across the South (including Charlotte, Jacksonville, Mobile, and Nashville). National observers point to three major U.S. Supreme Court rulings during the 1990s that curtailed the scope and duration of desegregation orders, enabling the return of segregated neighborhood schools and the evaporation of two decades of progress toward integrated education. For historians of educational policy, this apparent dissonance between past and present raises a troubling question. How do our historical interpretations of *Brown* explain—or fail to explain—how the nation arrived at these current policy dilemmas on race and education? This concluding chapter identifies three general types of scholarly writing on *Brown* and its aftermath—the unfinished struggle, the misguided struggle, and the continuing local

struggles—and evaluates how each of them have shaped our understanding of the evolution of black education reform in recent years.<sup>1</sup>

The first, and most prevalent, historical interpretation portrays black educational history over the past several decades as a heroic yet unfinished struggle for integration. One of the best illustrations of this tradition is James T. Patterson's *Brown v. Board of Education*, an outstanding synthesis of the shifting strategies within the school desegregation struggle during most of the twentieth century. His story begins with the young cadre of NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyers, such as Thurgood Marshall, and their courageous black plaintiffs who began challenging the "separate but equal" *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in the 1930s. At first, Marshall attacked the "equal" part of "separate but equal," forcing Southern states to live up to their promise of providing equal resources for black schools. He successfully persuaded the Court to force Missouri to accept the expensive remedy of opening a black law school in the 1938 *Gaines* decision. Over time, these precedent-building victories allowed Marshall to shift his legal strategy from the tangible benefits of equal resources to the intangible benefits of integrated education, thereby attacking the "separate" clause head-on. In the 1950 *Sweatt and McLaurin* decisions, Marshall convinced the Court that physically separating the small handful of black law and graduate school students from white professors and classmates deprived them of the free exchange of ideas, the fundamental basis of higher education. These favorable new rulings linked integration with equality, a concept that Marshall pressed the Court to expand for the elementary school cases in *Brown*.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the victorious *Brown* ruling in 1954, Patterson explains that the NAACP's battle continued to evolve after Southern whites erected new barriers to stall the pace of racial integration during the late 1950s and early 1960s. These ranged from crude intimidation against blacks seeking entry into white schools, to complex bureaucratic and legal obstacles to deter or delay black transfers, to the systematic approach of closing down an entire school district and diverting public funds into vouchers for whites to attend private schools. Confronted with these obstacles, NAACP lawyers went back to court and fought hard to win new rulings in the late 1960s that demanded results in racial integration, most often through affirmative steps such as busing and redistricting. But once again, white conservatives found new ways to protect their interests through the political process. President Nixon's "Southern Strategy" to win conservative white votes for the Republican Party slowed down the pace of federal desegregation enforcement in the early 1970s. Later, President Reagan's reconfiguration of the U.S. Supreme Court signaled a retreat on civil rights in the 1980s. Although the black-led school integration movement ended the travesty of legalized segregation and reminded America of its constitutional promises of equal protection

under law, the campaign to fully integrate public schools remained unfinished at the close of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Although Patterson offers a broad survey, his account does not adequately explain the recent evolution of black educational activism since the late 1970s. Although the bulk of the book provides a careful historical analysis of changing reform strategies from the 1930s through the early 1970s, the final two chapters abruptly shift to a static characterization of two groups of activists in the last two decades. On one hand, Patterson writes, the "optimists" in the civil rights movement "kept the faith" in the promise of *Brown* and continued to "fight their good fight." On the other hand, "pessimists," like former NAACP attorneys Robert Carter and Derrick Bell and social psychologist Kenneth Clark, became "gloomy" and "bitter" about the prospects of integration in a racist society and turned their backs on the cause. By simplistically dividing historical actors into two fixed categories—optimists and pessimists—Patterson loses track of his previous analysis on how the black education struggle had changed over time. Furthermore, he sharply criticizes "pessimists" who advanced a "separatist nostalgia" about the positive aspects of all-black schooling during the Jim Crow era, dismissing it as a "poor reading of history and the product of disillusion" with the recent stalemates of racial progress.

Patterson issues a valuable warning against romanticizing the past, but his own narrative is not immune from this tendency. Consider an alternative interpretation of Patterson's story using the same categories and evidence. From the perspective of black voucher supporters in the 1990s, the integrationists could be renamed the "nostalgic optimists" for believing that the reform strategies devised in the 1950s and 1960s are still appropriate for today. Black voucher supporters might also label themselves "pragmatic realists" for creating a new strategy to achieve what the past decades of the school integration struggle had not fully attained. Like many historians of the civil rights era, Patterson centers his narrative squarely on *Brown*, and he creates a compelling account of this important story. Yet in doing so, he elevates the school integration movement as the only struggle in black educational history during the twentieth century, thereby casting aside all the other struggles observed in cities like Milwaukee: hiring black teachers, acculturating new migrants, exercising community control, teaching black history, and securing vouchers to leave the system. Viewing all of black educational history through the lens of *Brown* distorts our vision of the past because it obscures how reform movements have evolved with the changing historical context and limits our understanding of the scope of these movements' goals.<sup>4</sup>

A second trend in historical interpretation depicts the past half-century of black education reform as an originally noble yet eventually misguided

struggle. The most influential work along this line has been Diane Ravitch's *Troubled Crusade*, a sweeping synthesis of changes in American education during the postwar era. She argues that when NAACP lawyers originally demanded the elimination of legalized segregation in the 1950s, they justified their case on the egalitarian principles of the Constitution and envisioned a color-blind society. Specifically, when Justice Felix Frankfurter asked attorney Thurgood Marshall what remedy he envisioned if the Court ruled in his favor, he replied that education officials should be prohibited "from segregating on the basis of race or color" when drawing school attendance boundary lines. "If the lines are drawn on a natural basis, without regard to race or color, then I think that nobody would have any complaint," Marshall added. After the Supreme Court's initial *Brown* decision led to confusion over implementation, this view came to be adopted by a lower court as the "*Briggs* dictum" in 1955, stating that segregation was illegal if forced by governmental power but still legal if voluntarily agreed upon.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next two decades, Ravitch contends, the integration movement veered away from this noble vision of color-blindness and pursued a misguided crusade for color-consciousness. Pressure from federal authorities, liberal social scientists, and militant black power activists led the federal courts to change course, she argues. The 1968 *Green* decision ruled that "freedom of choice" plans were insufficient because they did not desegregate students fast enough, and the 1971 *Swann* decision required schools to take affirmative steps to create racially balanced schools. Former tools of segregation—such as using race to draw school boundaries, as well as busing and quotas—were now considered to be fair tools for integration, states Ravitch. During the 1970s, as color-conscious advocates imposed bureaucratic mandates for multicultural curricula and affirmative action policies on schools, they distracted educators from their core teaching mission and undermined their moral authority to socialize youth. What began as a noble struggle resulted in a collapse of academic standards, she asserts, shortchanging the black students whom the integration movement was intended to serve.<sup>6</sup>

Like Patterson, Ravitch's interpretation is problematic because it fails to recognize the dynamic nature of black reform movements as they respond to the shifting historical context. Whereas Patterson faults selected black activists who changed their views on integration, Ravitch criticizes the entire integration movement for evolving over time. To be sure, Ravitch's account provides a valuable historical reminder that Thurgood Marshall initially envisioned *Brown* as the removal of segregative barriers in the early 1950s. But her account does not adequately address the transformation of white power in controlling the terms of desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s and the need for integration supporters to shift their strategies ac-

cordingly and press for race-based reforms. The white-dominated world of the 1950s and 1960s was certainly not color-blind in practice, even though the NAACP crafted a color-blind rhetoric as their best strategy for promoting black rights at the time. When the judicial system forced whites to accept color-blind principles in educational policy, many adapted new ways of protecting white privilege in schools, prompting new responses in turn from integration activists. In sum, both Patterson's and Ravitch's interpretations favor a static view of history and do not fully consider how black reform activists and movements may evolve over time, continually adapting to the prevailing context, seeking new ways to secure the broader goals that have not yet been fully achieved.

A third trend of historical interpretation examines continuing local struggles for black education, and this growing body of literature offers some insightful alternatives to both of the national-level narratives cited above. As political theorist Jennifer Hochschild has observed, local movements can sometimes be quite difficult to characterize since some definitions of "quality black education" may simultaneously attract both conservative and radical supporters. Yet local histories of black educational struggles, when carefully researched and written, offer several advantages: the ability to trace subtle developments in one location over several decades, to contrast viewpoints from multiple participants' perspectives, and to assess the varying influence of national-level factors. Furthermore, these rich local histories are most valuable when read in comparison to one another. By contrasting how local groups of black education activists defined goals on their own terms and how they exercised the limited power available to achieve their aims, we learn a great deal about the importance of historical context. Struggles over race and school reform vary from place to place, and even in the same location, they evolve from decade to decade.<sup>7</sup>

For example, compare how black activists in two different rural Southern communities responded to "freedom of choice" desegregation plans in the latter half of the 1960s. First, in Constance Curry's *Silver Rights*, Mae Bertha and Matthew Carter of Sunflower County, Mississippi, longed for their children to have a better life than sharecropping cotton on white plantations. Dilapidated black schools had far fewer resources than white schools did; in the 1950s, only a third of the black teachers in the county had even completed high school. Ten years after *Brown*, federal authorities eventually pressured local white officials to comply with the minimalist *Briggs* dictum. Sunflower County's all-white school board fulfilled the letter of the law by instituting a freedom of choice desegregation plan, whereby each family would choose a public school for its children. In truth, the plan continued to protect white interests, since blacks were intimidated from choosing white schools. In 1965, the Carter family was the only black family in the entire

county who dared to cross the racial line. They courageously defied physical violence and economic retaliation to choose white schools in search of the best education available in the county. Two years later, "freedom of choice" had produced scarcely any movement away from the preexisting system of segregation. So the Carters and their allies filed a federal lawsuit to prohibit this so-called voluntary desegregation method and to replace it with the mandatory integration of all blacks into white schools. In the end, the Carters finally won their court battle against the cruel hoax of "freedom of choice," though their broader struggle for equal educational opportunity still continued.<sup>8</sup>

Yet in David Cecelski's *Along Freedom Road*, hundreds of black families rose up to protest the elimination of freedom of choice desegregation in the late 1960s in Hyde County, North Carolina. Black residents of this coastal fishing community had built their own one-room schoolhouses in the late nineteenth century and, despite limited resources, created a secondary school in the 1930s with high academic standards and respected roles for black teachers as community leaders. State aid for segregated schools increased in the 1950s, when North Carolina narrowed the resource gap with white schools in an attempt to avert desegregation litigation. A decade after *Brown*, Hyde County whites introduced freedom of choice plans (similar to Curry's account), and while twenty-one black children initially transferred to white schools, that number soon declined as blacks developed concerns over student mistreatment, the fate of black educators' jobs, and barriers against their full participation in the desegregation planning process. Eventually, after federal officials declared freedom of choice plans to be a failure for achieving significant racial balancing in Hyde County in 1968, the white-dominated school board closed the black community schools and mandated one-way integration to white institutions. Local black leaders responded that they were "tired of having to bear the burdens of integration" and, with the help of civil rights allies, held protest marches to the state capitol and a year-long boycott to demand the reopening of their schools. In contrast to Sunflower County, many Hyde County blacks demanded that freedom of choice be reinstated to protect black schools, one of the most essential cultural and political institutions in their community. After clashes with white police and Klansmen, Hyde County's black protesters negotiated a bilateral desegregation agreement, which reopened the black high school (though only as an elementary school) and guaranteed black educators' jobs and new positions of authority in school administration. Although several important concessions had been won, the Hyde County struggle was far from over.<sup>9</sup>

Contrasting Curry's and Cecelski's local narratives of black education struggles tells us how an identical reform policy can have different meanings and provoke very different reactions, depending upon the historical con-

text surrounding its implementation. Understanding why blacks opposed freedom of choice in one Southern county yet supported it in another requires looking beyond the policy label and examining the fabric of each community. In Sunflower County, it appears that both white state officials and local blacks had invested fewer financial and cultural resources in their black schools over time, in contrast to the better-resourced schools in Hyde County that seem to have played a more central role in the life of the black community. As a result, "freedom of choice" had no fixed meaning across the South, so it did not provoke a uniform response from these two different communities. Simply put, there was more than one struggle.<sup>10</sup>

Whether in Mississippi, North Carolina, or even Milwaukee, black education reformers have pursued the same broad objective: to assert greater power over school policies and practices to uplift the race. Only the means of achieving that end have changed, over time and place. But the reasons why black reformers have engaged in so many different types of struggles become much clearer when viewed through historical lenses, particularly at the local level. As racism, the key factor underlying these struggles, has adapted to new situations and continues to privilege white interests, the definition of real, lasting power has sometimes eluded reformers since it, too, varies from place to place; even in one location, it continues to change over time. At first glance, many contemporary black school reform movements—for neighborhood schools, Afrocentric curriculum, and private vouchers—seem anomalous with the spirit of the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown*. But given the evidence that some school desegregation policies were fundamentally designed to protect white interests, as many describe Milwaukee's plans of the late 1970s, then it makes sense that some black activists would challenge these policies in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, from a historical perspective, the past and present struggles of black education reform are not so far apart. In fact, if black education movements had remained frozen in time, so that the struggles and strategies of 1954 were identical to those observed fifty years later, we would be facing an even greater state of historical confusion. This is the important, subtle lesson that local histories of race, power, and school reform can teach us.

Yet for policy-hungry audiences, the weakness of this third category of historical interpretation—continuing local struggles for black education—is its inability (or its refusal) to pin down a specific list of useful prescriptions for "what works" regarding race and education. Other interpretations that claim to deliver a definitive summary of the national legacy of *Brown* (whether the unfinished, or the misguided versions) seem to satisfy this appetite, but only temporarily. Perhaps the fundamental problem here can be resolved only by rethinking the relationship between history and policy. Contrary to George Santayana's famous curse that those who fail to

learn from history will be condemned to repeat it, most historians would never claim that the past will ever be repeated. Indeed, while some similarities may arise between past and future events, they will always be accompanied by differences in historical context, which is continually changing. Consider then what policy historians Richard Neustadt and Ernest May pose in their book, *Thinking in Time*, as an alternative reason for studying the past: its ability to simulate historical imagination. "Seeing the past can help one envision alternative futures," they write. While history cannot tell policy-makers what to do, studying the past can teach us how to ask probing questions, especially about our presumptions about contemporary policies. "The point is to get forward, as soon as possible, the questions that ought to be asked," they argue, "before anyone says, 'This is what we should do' or 'Here's how to do it.'"<sup>11</sup>

Following Neustadt and May's advice, what have we learned from Milwaukee's history of race and schooling, and how does it shape the questions we should be asking about contemporary educational policy, for both the city and the nation at large? This book has shown that education reform movements have evolved in Milwaukee from the 1930s to the present as different generations of black activists have responded to changing expressions of racism and their shifting perceptions of the needs of black communities. As each generation fought and won a bit of power over the system, its victories (and compromises) entailed serious consequences for the generations that followed. Beginning in the Depression era, when William Kelley and the Urban League organized to break Milwaukee's barriers against hiring black teachers, their eventual victory in the 1950s came at the cost of accepting an increasingly segregated school system. When Lloyd Barbee, Marian McEvilly, and MUSIC confronted school segregation in the 1960s, their subsequent legal victory in the late 1970s came at the cost of accepting a magnet school desegregation plan that privileged whites and disproportionately burdened inner-city blacks. More recently, when Howard Fuller and the Coalition to Save North Division fought to maintain North Division as an inner-city neighborhood high school, their victory in the early 1980s came at the cost of embracing a system that did very little to improve the standard indicators of academic quality for black students. During each of these decades, black activists brought vibrant coalitions of people together with slogans such as "Jobs," "Integration," and "Save North Division," but these slogans have been mere representations of the real, lasting power needed to continually improve education and uplift the race over the long haul.

Learning these difficult lessons from Milwaukee's past leads us to pose hard questions to the black education reformers of today. For example, if twenty-first century proponents of returning to neighborhood schooling, or expanding metropolitan integration efforts, should happen to gain victo-

ries in their respective efforts, what would be the long-term consequences for future generations? As for the private school voucher movement, which made the most visible political gains in the 1990s, how might white privilege be reasserting itself through the broader implications of this market-based reform? If we have learned anything from Milwaukee's past, it is to maintain equal amounts of hope and healthy skepticism for every reform effort. Each of them can point us in positive directions, yet none of them should be mistaken for a panacea. For example, cracks have already appeared in Polly Williams's fifteen-year-old coalition for private school vouchers. If the past teaches us that coalition memberships are often more fluid than the ideological positions voiced by official leaders, then perhaps we might witness an entirely new reform movement arise out of the voucher coalition in the not-too-distant future.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to the popular impressions conveyed by national-level narratives of *Brown*, there is no steady historical march of progress for jobs, integration, black power, or choice. Rather, Milwaukee's experience in the twentieth century tells us that black education reform is best understood as an overlapping series of evolving struggles to gain power to uplift the race through improved schooling. If we fail to look at contemporary debates over race and education through historical lenses with a rich appreciation of both change and continuity across different contexts, then we will never fully understand them. Yet there is a hopeful message in all of this. From a historical perspective, the evolution of reform movements does not imply a mechanical process; instead, it is a process of creative adaptation. While activists in Milwaukee and elsewhere clearly have responded to political, cultural, and demographic changes in their local environments, they still make human decisions, point out new possibilities, build innovative coalitions, and cause historical change to happen. If we learn more about race and reform movements in the past—especially their subtle lessons about the dynamic nature of privilege and power—perhaps we can strengthen our collective capacity to make a difference in the future.

## NOTES

### ABBREVIATIONS

**BARBEE PAPERS** Lloyd A. Barbee Papers, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.

**BARNDT PAPERS** Michael Barndt Papers, in possession of author

**DORSEY PAPERS** James Dorsey Papers, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wis.

**MILWAUKEE CORE PAPERS** Congress of Racial Equality, Milwaukee Chapter, Papers, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.

**MILWAUKEE NAACP PAPERS** National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Milwaukee Branch, Papers, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.

**MILWAUKEE URBAN LEAGUE PAPERS** Milwaukee Urban League Papers, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.

**MORHEUSER PAPERS** Marilyn Morheuser Papers, in possession of author

**NATIONAL NAACP PAPERS** National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE PAPERS** National Urban League Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**PETERSON PAPERS** Bob Peterson Papers, in possession of author

**REUSS PAPERS** Henry S. Reuss Papers, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.

**WILLIAMS PAPERS** Evelyn Williams Papers, in possession of author

**ZABLOCKI PAPERS** Clement J. Zablocki Papers, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wis.



"Strange Bedfellows and Uncertain Futures"; McGroarty, *Break These Chains*; Witte, *Market Approach to Education*; and Lowe and Whipp, "Examining the Milwaukee Parent Choice Program."

34. Holt, *Not Yet "Free at Last,"* 72, 210; Byndloss, "Resistance, Confrontation, and Accommodation"; Lowe and Whipp, "Examining the Milwaukee Parent Choice Program," 38; African American Male Task Force, *Educating African American Males*; Leake and Leake, "Islands of Hope"; Leake and Faltz, "Do We Need to Desegregate All of Our Black Schools?"; Murrell, "Afrocentric Immersion"; Howard Fuller, interview with author, 1995; *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 19 April 1995.

35. Wisconsin Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Impact of School Desegregation in Milwaukee*; Murphy and Pawasarat, "Why It Failed"; Peterson, "Neighborhood Schools"; Peterson and Miller, "Forward to the Past?"; Barndt and McNally, *Return to Separate and Unequal*; *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 30 December 2002, 27 February 2003.

## CONCLUSION

1. Olson, "Black Community Is Frustrated"; Orfield and Eaton, *Dismantling Desegregation*; Orfield, *Schools More Separate*; Patterson, *Brown v. Board*, 212. See a similar interpretive taxonomy in Hochschild, *Thirty Years after Brown*, 17-22.

2. Patterson, *Brown v. Board*; xxi, 14-20; *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* (12 December 1938); *Sweatt v. Painter* (5 June 1950); *McLaurin v. Oklahoma* (5 June 1950).

3. Patterson; *Brown v. Board*, 79, 142-46, 153-55, 171-72.

4. *Ibid.*, 192-94, 210-11, 218-21. Compare with Carter, "Reassessment of *Brown v. Board*," and Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, chapter 4.

5. Ravitch, *Troubled Crusade*, 114, 127; *Briggs v. Elliott* (15 July 1955). See also Wolters, *Burden of Brown*.

6. Ravitch, *Troubled Crusade*, 165-66, 176, chapter 8; *Green v. New Kent County* (27 May 1968); *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* (20 April 1971).

7. Hochschild, *Thirty Years after Brown*, 20. See also Lowe and Kantor, "Considerations."

8. Curry, *Silver Rights*, xix, 34, 172.

9. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road*, 29, 33, 59, 60-64, 69, 92, 152-53.

10. For more on this example of contrasts, see Dougherty et al., "Teaching *Brown*."

11. Neustadt and May, *Thinking in Time*, xv, 240.

12. Miner, "Splits Widen."

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