



---

## BACKPEDALING ON *BROWN*: THE RE-SEGREGATION OF OUR NATION'S SCHOOLS



Tomorrow marks the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court decision that our children's books celebrate for ending segregation in our nation's schools. But that version of history is sanitized. The anniversary is bittersweet. *Brown* itself faced immediate pushback that has never relented during those 65 years and has limited the case's ability to compel integration.

For a while, beginning with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and continuing with a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and early 70s, there was reason for hope. And there was real process. Yet today even that progress has stalled, according to *Harming our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years after Brown*, a report released last week by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA and the Center for Education and Civil Rights at Penn State University.

Desegregation for Black students peaked in 1988, according to the authors of the report, who include NEPC Fellows [Erica Frankenberg](#) and [Gary Orfield](#). Since that time, segregation for Black students in the South has increased by 12 percentage points, while also rising in every region of the United States. Nationwide, the share of intensely segregated minority schools that are 90 to 100 percent non-White has more than tripled, to 16 percent. That's despite the fact that Blacks comprise roughly the same percentage of the public student population today as they did in the 1950s.

By contrast, the percentage of Whites has been declining since that time, with Whites now comprising less than half (48 percent) of public school enrollment. In the meantime, the percentage of Hispanic students has skyrocketed from 5 percent to 26 percent since 1970. One might think that this would reduce racial isolation among Whites, since there are now more students of color who might help integrate schools. Yet Whites are the nation's most

segregated racial group. White public school students attend, on average, a school in which nearly 70 percent of their classmates are also White. Hispanic students are also highly segregated, attending schools in which 55 percent of their classmates are also Hispanic.

As our nation reaches new heights of racial diversity, why have our schools become increasingly segregated? The UCLA report explains that, starting in the 1990s, a series of Supreme Court decisions ended hundreds of desegregation orders. In addition, aside from the small Magnet School Assistance Program, the federal government today has no programs to support voluntary integration.

Our nation's growing school segregation has many long-term consequences. Over half a century of research has demonstrated that, for students of color, segregation is associated with lower rates of achievement, college success, long-term employment and income—with no corresponding benefits for White students (as if any such benefits would provide a justification). Further, segregated schools leave students of all races and ethnicities unprepared to raise their families, work and participate in the civic life of in an increasingly diverse society.

The UCLA report concludes with recommendations to reverse the erosion of the legacy of *Brown*. These suggestions include opposing the breakup of school districts in racially identifiable enclaves, enforcing and implementing fair housing policies, incorporating equity-related goals into school choice plans, and recruiting and retaining a diverse teaching staff in universities and K-12 schools.

“As we mark its 65th anniversary, the promise of *Brown* appears a distant vision in our dangerously polarized society,” Orfield said [upon release of the report](#).

Segregation is expanding in almost all regions of the country. Little has been done for a generation. There has been no meaningful federal government effort devoted to foster the voluntary integration of the schools, and it has been decades since federal agencies funded research about effective strategies for school integration. We have to do more.

Find *Harming our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years after Brown*, authored by Erica Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer B. Ayscue, & Gary Orfield, at <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/harming-our-common-future-americas-segregated-schools-65-years-after-brown/Brown-65-050919v4-final.pdf>.

## NEPC Resources on School Segregation

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>