

School Segregation in the NY - NJ Metropolitan Area

by Michael Pustorino and Justin Sulsky

Modern suburban America was shaped after World War II as young veterans took advantage of the GI Bill to buy new homes for themselves and their families. However, instead of promoting social equality in the United States (Katznelson, 2005), the GI Bill exacerbated the racial inequality between African Americans and Whites. White veterans quickly moved up the economic ladder while their African American counterparts fell victim to an unfair playing field. Congress allowed state and local governments to administer programs and benefits, which in many cases meant racial segregation was enforced. Banks ensured segregated suburbs by refusing to grant Black families mortgages that would allow them to move into predominately White communities. In the New York metropolitan area in 1950, only 1.7% of nearly 500,000 mortgaged properties belonged to non-whites (Cohen, 171). Some communities, such as Levittown on Long Island, forced homebuyers to sign agreements that they would not sell or rent to non-whites (Newsday, 413). In 1953, when Levittown, New York had a population of 70,000 people, it was the largest community in the country without a single Black person.

School Segregation in New Jersey

Some of the major battles against school segregation in the North took place in New York – New Jersey metropolitan area suburban communities. In the 1930s and 1940s, New Jersey was a hotbed of protest against segregated schools. In 1927, Black parents in Tom's River, New Jersey, boycotted a segregated school and marched on the school district headquarters. In the 1930s, in Montclair and East Orange, there were protests and boycotts. Black students had to contend with severe educational inequality, especially overcrowding (Sugrue, 176). In 1943, Black parents, with support from the New Jersey branch of the NAACP, challenged school segregation in Trenton and demanded "Double Victory." This meant both victory over fascism in Europe and over Jim Crow in the United States. In response to a concerted campaign by the New Jersey NAACP, a report on widespread discrimination issued by Teachers College of Columbia University, and the American reaction to Nazi Germany during World War II, New Jersey created the Division Against Discrimination and amended the state constitution to forbid segregation in schools based on race, creed, or color. In 1949, the state legislature passed an anti-discrimination law giving the state government the power to issue "cease and desist" orders to stop the segregation of schools and public facilities (Sugrue, 176-179). However, the new state laws were not self-enforcing and post-World War II suburbanization led to increased *de facto* community and school segregation. At the same time as White families were leaving Newark, Camden, and Jersey City for new suburban communities, large numbers of poor Blacks were migrating to these urban centers from the South.

In February 1962, *The New York Times* published an interview with New Jersey Governor Richard Hughes, who promised to fight for new civil rights laws that would end educational and housing discrimination. Another *Times* article featured Newark School Commissioner Dr. Frederic Raubinger. In 1963, he negotiated an agreement with the Oakwood School Board in suburban Orange, New Jersey that permitted students in overwhelmingly Black schools to transfer to other elementary schools in the Orange district. Despite these efforts, Newark schools grew more racially segregated. Today, approximately sixty percent of Newark's public school students are African American, about three times the proportion statewide. Newark, with 31.9% Hispanic students, has almost double the statewide percentage of Hispanic students.

Currently, Newark is one of 31 Abbott Districts statewide where the New Jersey State Supreme Court has mandated increased state funding for education. The school district has also been operated by the State Education Department since 1995. Despite this, the city's public schools continue to be among the lowest performing in the state with low high school graduation rates and low standardized test scores. In 2010, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, promised to donate \$100 million to Newark schools, but it is too early to evaluate its impact.

Segregated NY Suburbs

The battle against school segregation also has a long history in New York State. In 1943 there were two elementary schools in Hillburn, a village in Rockland County. One school had a new gymnasium and auditorium and was attended by White children. The other school was more of a wooden shack than a school and had no indoor

plumbing. It was attended by the community's Black children. The local branch of the NAACP and Black parents organized a six-week school boycott. Meanwhile Thurgood Marshall, a lawyer with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, successfully petitioned the state education commissioner to integrate the formerly White-only school. Success in Hillburn led to the desegregation of New Rochelle schools in Westchester County (Sugrue, 168). Despite some successes, suburb-anization largely meant greater racial segregation. By some measures Long Island, New York is the most segregated suburb in the United States (Lambert, 2002). Erase Racism, a non-profit organization based in Syosset, New York that seeks to shed light on structural racism, noted in a 2002 report: "Although Long Island's population is 8.5% African American, two thirds of Long Island's cities, towns and villages remain less than 1% Black, and one third have no Black residents. Ninety percent of Long Island's Black residents live in 20% of its communities."

Garden City and Hempstead are only one stop apart on the Long Island Rail Road. Yet Garden City is 92% white and has a median income of \$120,305, while Hempstead is 83% non-white with a median income of \$46,675. In the 2008-2009 school year, not a single Garden City student dropped out and 97% of students went on to college. In Hempstead, the number of high school graduates (251) was only a bit higher than the number of dropouts (NYSTAR, 2010: 237).

As early as 1963, the Hempstead school board proposed merging the district with neighboring Garden City and Uniondale, which was predominately white at that time ("Hempstead Asks Schools Mergers," *The New York Times*, 1963). Uniondale parents strongly opposed the plan and circulated a petition that garnered 3,600 signatures demanding the "preservation of neighboring schools in Uniondale."

Unfortunately, the Garden City-Hempstead divide is not an isolated example. There are similarly sharp demographic differences and educational performance levels between the neighboring high schools of the Westbury and East Williston school districts that are separated by 1.7 miles and an apparently unbreakable class and racial barrier. Due to long-standing problems, the New York State Education Department took over management of the 100% minority Roosevelt school district in 2002. Meanwhile, in the neighboring Bellmore-Merrick school district, students perform at a much higher academic level. That district remains overwhelmingly White and much more affluent. If Roosevelt students were included in the highly regarded Bellmore-Merrick school system, the student population in the combined district would still be over seventy percent White.

In its 2009 report on education, the Long Island Index declared that maintaining the status quo will continue to under-educate a large segment of the area's children. Among other things, segregation contributes to a stagnant Long Island economy. In order to create change, the report urges Long Island to accept Erase Racism's proposal to create 15 consolidated school districts that would be more diverse and drastically reduce cost to taxpayers. The plan is modeled on a segregation plan in Northern Virginia where a consolidated school system is ethnically diverse and maintains a reputation for academic excellence. Another proposal to end inequality would be to stop tying school taxes to property taxes. Vermont replaced local school taxes with a state tax fund that is distributed across the state so that wealthier communities contribute to the education of all the state's children.

References

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School Segregation in New York and New Jersey

A. "Hughes Will Press Civil Rights Fight"

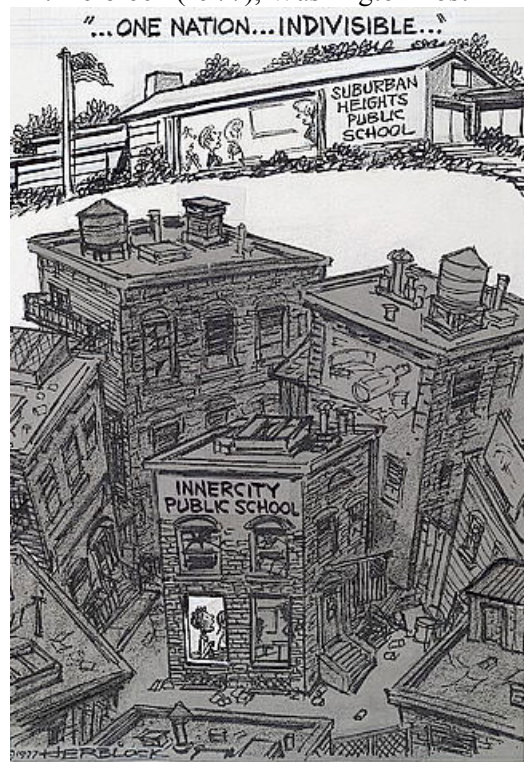
New York Times February 10, 1962

Gov. Richard J. Hughes promised tonight to fight for New Jersey civil rights laws "strong enough" to end all discrimination in education, housing and other fields . . . The Governor left little doubt that his references to civil rights were motivated by school segregation problems in Englewood, Orange, Morristown, and elsewhere in Jersey. With Vice President Johnson, Mr. Hughes addressed nearly 3,000 guests at a \$100-a-plate Democratic fundraising dinner . . . "We must see that every New Jerseyman is free to live in the home he can afford, uninhibited by barriers of discrimination. We must assure our children of the education so necessary in the complex society they will inherit." Mr. Hughes is determined to tighten the present state housing law to bar discrimination except in the rental of rooms in one-family owner-occupied houses and apartments in two-family owner-occupied dwellings. The existing statute excludes rentals in owner-occupied dwellings of less than four apartments and sales in developments of ten houses or fewer.

Questions

1. Who was Governor Hughes's audience? Why is that significant?
2. How did Governor Hughes plan to end housing discrimination in New Jersey?

B. Herblock (1977), Washington Post



Questions

1. How are the two schools different?
2. In your opinion, why does the cartoonist call this cartoon "One Nation . . . Indivisible"?

C. "Hempstead Asks Schools Mergers Linking of 3 Districts Urged to End Racial Imbalance"

The New York Times, August 24, 1963

The Hempstead School Board has unanimously proposed that its school district be merged with those of Garden City and part of Uniondale to end racial imbalances here. The plan also called for the closing of one of its six elementary schools because it is 89 percent Negro. The district's elementary schools have 3,417 pupils of whom 3,093 are Negroes, or about 60 percent. In the 1960 Federal census, Hempstead's population was 34,659, and unofficial estimates place the Negro portion at about 23 percent of the population. The board added that it did not seem consistent to expect Hempstead residents "to struggle alone with the insoluble local problems within a racially imbalanced school district while the larger over-all issue can be approached through elimination of arbitrary district boundary lines separating our schools from those enrolling virtually all white pupils." Neither the Garden City nor the Union School Districts, which are contiguous with Hempstead, have problems of racial imbalance. A spokesman for the Garden City School Board refused to comment. A Uniondale spokesman said the proposed merger would be opposed.

Questions

1. What did the Hempstead School propose?
2. What was the response of the neighboring districts?

Essay: In your opinion, why does school segregation continue to be such an intractable problem in the New York – New Jersey metropolitan area?