

We can have diversity, achievement



By Ann McColl
SPECIAL TO THE POST

North Carolina is becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse.

That's a fact. Our public schools can capitalize on this diversity or can go back to the segregation patterns that existed 50 years ago. That's a choice.

Population trends, school segregation patterns, and a United States Supreme Court opinion have converged in a way that calls upon us to consider the goals of diversity in public schools. This issue is especially timely as we approach the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the unanimous opinion by the

Supreme Court that ended the separate but equal doctrine and required integration in schools.

North Carolina's growing population is becoming increasingly diverse, including a roughly 400 percent increase in the Hispanic population in just 10 years. This diversity is reflected in the public schools where four of every 10 students are of minority race or ethnicity.

While diversity has been increasing, North Carolina's schools are becoming more segregated. This is occurring at the school level and in some upper grade classrooms. Resegregation is also evident in the increased number of minority students

attending racially isolated schools. A recent study of North Carolina schools by Duke University professors found a substantial increase over just a five year period in the percentage of "nonwhite" students attending schools with "nonwhite" populations of 90-100 percent. There were particularly large increases in the coastal region (3.0 percent to 11.8 percent) and in some of the large school districts, notably Winston-Salem/Forsyth (from 0 to 20 percent) and Charlotte-Mecklenburg (from 2.2 percent to 6.9 percent).

Although residential segregation is the main cause for school segregation, it is not

the basis for the trend towards resegregation of our schools. In fact, residential segregation has decreased in North Carolina from 1990 to 2000.

With an increase in diversity and a decrease in residential segregation, how have our schools become more segregated? Part of the answer is in the convoluted history of school desegregation lawsuits. In the post-Brown era, courts enforced integration plans in order to correct segregation that was required or sanctioned by law. Schools became fairly integrated under these court orders. But as residential patterns continued to cause school segregation, courts became reluctant to require schools to fix issues not related to the unlawful segregation.

While not required, many communities chose to pursue diversity in schools on the premise in *Brown* that separate schools were inherently unequal. These voluntary strategies faltered in the 1990s when courts, including those with jurisdiction over North Carolina, struck down such race-conscious plans without even determining whether diversity was a compelling interest of schools.

While the legal basis for integration was unraveling, student achievement became the dominant feature of education reform. Expectations for parental options, such as the ability to choose a charter school or a magnet school have also increased. With state-mandated accountability and local pressure to respond to these initiatives, integration strategies were sometimes neglected or even intentionally derailed as no longer important or as perceived barriers to these other reforms.

This past summer, the Supreme Court declared that the educational benefits of diversity justified taking race and other measures of

diversity into account in admission decisions at the University of Michigan Law School. It is hardly a stretch to apply the educational

benefits of diversity at the law school to public schools. For example, the Supreme Court recognized the value of a diverse student body for breaking down racial stereotypes, making classroom discussion livelier and more enlightening, and for providing students with exposure to widely diverse people, cultures, and viewpoints so that they can be better prepared for the global economy, workplaces, the military and society.

For public schools, the Supreme Court opinion reopens the door for considering diversity. It is not a legal requirement, but a choice made by local boards with their community. How we frame this choice is critical. It cannot be an "either or" choice: either diversity or student achievement; either diversity or parental options. Rather, it should be whether to pursue the educational benefits of diversity in order to bring together these important initiatives.

Some communities may not be ready to revisit this issue. The wounds of past battles and racial divisions may be too raw. The student assignment plan may be too new. For communities that are ready to reverse trends towards resegregation, they will need to define diversity, identify its educational benefits, and develop particular strategies that meet Supreme Court criteria and best incorporate their other educational goals. While this may take some time, wouldn't it be fitting to be able to answer whether we are committed to the importance of diversity in time for the celebration of *Brown* in 2004?

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OUR VOICES

Convenient change in rules

By Bill Fletcher Jr.
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Any regular reader of my columns knows that, despite my opposition to the invasion of Iraq, I have never been fond of Saddam Hussein. The descriptions of his diabolical approach to ruling Iraq are without dispute.

I am, however, very perplexed by the stand taken by the Bush administration on Hussein's status as a prisoner. The administration has announced that Hussein will not be granted prisoner of war status. The justification seems to be that Hussein is so evil that he does not deserve it.

I hate to break it to the administration, but there are no indices of evil when it comes to prisoner of war status. If there is a war and someone fighting for one side or the other is captured, that individual is a prisoner of war. It does not matter whether that person is a foot soldier or the president of the Republic of Iraq. It does not matter whether that person took power in a coup or was an elected leader. Saddam Hussein was the internationally-recognized president of Iraq. His country was illegally invaded, thus precipitating a war. He was ultimately captured. Therefore, according to the Geneva Convention, he is a prisoner of war.

The administration, however, seems to view things a bit differently. For them, basic rules do not seem to apply. It is okay, for instance, for the U.S.A. to break international law and invade a country if the administration believes it to be okay. It is okay for the Bush administration to concoct a category that the no one in the world recognizes called "enemy combatant" as a way of keeping prisoners captive without recourse to either prisoner of war status or the status of civilian prisoners (the situation facing all those in Guantanamo Bay). Thus, the status issue with Saddam Hussein is simply the logical course of the opportunistic use of language by an administration that will not let either facts, or laws get in the way of its objectives.

There is a tremendous danger when one allows a government to play fast and loose with international law and precedent. There is no way to stop it, nor any way of knowing the limits to which that it will go. Yes, it is absolutely the case that there are few people on this planet that will shed a tear for Saddam Hussein, but if the administration can unilaterally decide that the rules of war do not apply to Hussein, to whom do the rules of war apply? Is there a particular enemy, or set of enemies that the Bush administration will decide should receive the treatment afforded by the Geneva Convention? Or, does it depend on which side of the bed the president arises from each morning and who he decides happens to be evil?

From the standpoint of everyday citizens of the U.S.A., there is another important concern. If the U.S.A. does not recognize international law except when it benefits the current administration, why should any other country?

BILL FLETCHER Jr. is president of *TransAfrica Forum*, which raises awareness about issues facing Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America.

GOP would be smart to woo blacks, non-voters

CLARENCE PAGE



WASHINGTON

Sometimes I receive letters or e-mails that begin something like this: "I can't understand why blacks—or African Americans or whatever it is you want to call yourselves these days—stay so loyal to the Democratic Party. After all, President Bush appointed Colin Powell as his secretary of state and Condoleezza Rice as his foreign policy adviser."

And he showed good taste by doing so, didn't he?

However, as groundbreaking as their appointments were, most black people I know still are waiting for the Bush administration to create more jobs for blacks than just the two mentioned above.

Nevertheless, I appreciate sincere questions, as opposed to rants from people who just want to preach at me. Writers like the one mentioned above simply do not understand how the world looks from an African American point of view. If they did, they would not have to ask why nine out of 10 black votes tend to go to the Democrats.

Now Republican Party leaders say they are trying to close that gap. Yes, we've heard that before. But this time Ed Gillespie, chairman of the Republican National Committee, calls increasing

his party's share of the black vote "a top, top priority."

If so, the opportunities are there. Quite a few black voters, particularly the young, also sound dissatisfied with giving nine out of 10 of their votes to one party.

Item: The number of black respondents who called themselves Democrats slipped from 74 percent to 63 percent between 2000 and 2002 in polls by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a black-oriented think tank based in Washington. That could be a problem for Democrats and an opportunity for Republicans.

Also, 21 percent of the black respondents approved of President Bush's overall performance in a poll taken last summer by the independent Black America's Political Action Committee. That's more than twice the 9 percent of the black vote that went to the Bush-Cheney presidential ticket in 2000—which in itself was almost a 25 percent drop from the 13 percent of the black vote that the Republican Bob Dole-Jack Kemp ticket received in 1996.

Item: Republican Michael Bloomberg won 22 percent of the black vote in the 2001 New York City mayoral election. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, won 17 percent of the black vote in the California gubernatorial recall election last November.

With developments like those, the GOP has announced new outreach

efforts such as ads in black-oriented newspapers and television, radio programs to promote poll-tested Republican issues like tax cuts, "traditional family values" and school vouchers that are more popular with rank-and-file black voters than with liberal black leaders.

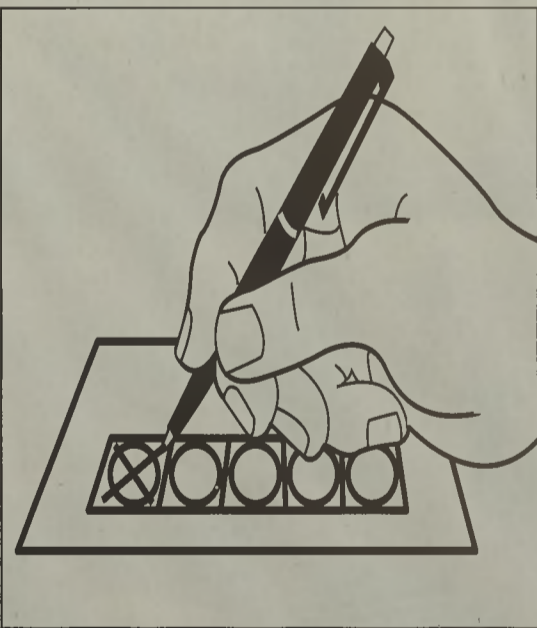
However—and this is a very significant "however"—party leaders have remained quiet about how much money they plan to spend on this effort.

"My guess is that it won't even come close to the level of what used to be called walking-around money," quipped David Bositis, senior political analyst at the Joint Center.

Alvin Williams, president of the independent BAMPAC, doesn't expect a dramatic turnout in black votes this year, either, although his long-range view was more upbeat. "The good news is that younger black voters are disillusioned with the Democratic Party and more want to be seen as 'independent,' quote, unquote."

Nevertheless, the GOP does not have to persuade black Democrats to switch parties if it can persuade black voters not to vote.

That's not hard to do when Democratic candidates fail to reach out to blacks very well, either. In Maryland's 2002 gubernatorial race, for example, Democratic Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend lost mostly because of a lackluster campaign and failure to pick a



black running mate. Her Republican opponent, Rep. Bob Ehrlich, who did choose a black running mate, Michael S. Steele, won 13 percent of Maryland's black vote overall, and 22 percent of Prince George's County, a black voter stronghold in suburban Washington. That high percentage of black votes, coupled with unusually low black turnout, enabled Ehrlich to edge Townsend out.

In other words, black Democrats can be "swing" voters, after all, simply by not voting for certain candidates.

As Chuck Todd, editor-in-chief of *The Hotline*, an Internet political newsletter, recently wrote, white voters don't swing that much,

either. Even though recent polls show about a third of voters call themselves "independent," most of those self-declared independents also tend to vote for one party or the other, just like partisans do. Fewer than 10 percent actually pick and choose candidates from both parties.

The most accurate definition of a swing voter, Todd wrote, "is a person who swings between voting and not voting." That also describes a lot of black voters.

With that in mind, each party would like to have your vote. If they can't have your vote, they would like for you to stay home. Either way works for them.

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