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OUR VIEW

The shame of a nation: Segregating public schools

It's September, and in many parts of the country, that means the beginning of a new school year. Children sometimes begin the new year worrying whether they'll make new friends. Parents sometimes worry about their children's classmates too, usually hoping they'll make "nice" friends and meet children who are "good kids." But how much do parents think about those classmates' color?



MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

As it turns out, race is the defining factor in many American schools. Many parents may take it for granted simply because so many children are already overwhelmingly likely to go to school with children who are mostly the same race as they are. In a new book being released this month, "The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America," gifted writer and educator Jonathan Kozol says this is America's shame: the persistence — and the latest spread — of school segregation and the inequality that has always come with it.

Last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, the historic decision that ended legal school segregation. Many Americans see Brown v. Board as the happy ending to the story and think school segregation, like "colored" restrooms, is now ancient history. But school segregation never completely went away. And in a report examining Brown's anniversary, "Brown at 50: King's Dream or Plessy's Nightmare?" the Harvard Civil Rights Project pointed out that as a result of policy changes over the last decade, American schools are actually re-segregating. The proportion of black students in majority white schools is lower now than at any time since 1968. Almost three-quarters of black and Latino students attend schools that are predominantly minority, and more than two million, including more than a quarter of black students in the Northeast and Midwest, attend schools the researchers call "apartheid schools," in which 99 to 100 percent of children are nonwhite.

The most shameful part about the persistence and resurgence of school segregation is that "apartheid schools" and other schools with predominantly minority students remain unequal. This is what makes them "Plessy's nightmare." The 1896, Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision said facilities for Blacks could be "separate but equal," but in reality segregated facilities rarely came anywhere close to "equal," as anyone who grew up in the segregated South clearly remembers.

Kozol notes studies show 35 states spend less on students in school districts with the highest numbers of minority children than on students in the districts with the fewest minority children — on average, \$1,100 less per child. Similar gaps are also true when the comparison is done between districts with poor and nonpoor children, and these gaps are especially stark when you magnify them across an entire class or school.

For example, Kozol points out that in New York, a state where gaps are especially large, a high-poverty elementary school with about 400 students would receive over \$1 million less per year than comparable schools in districts with the fewest number of poor children.

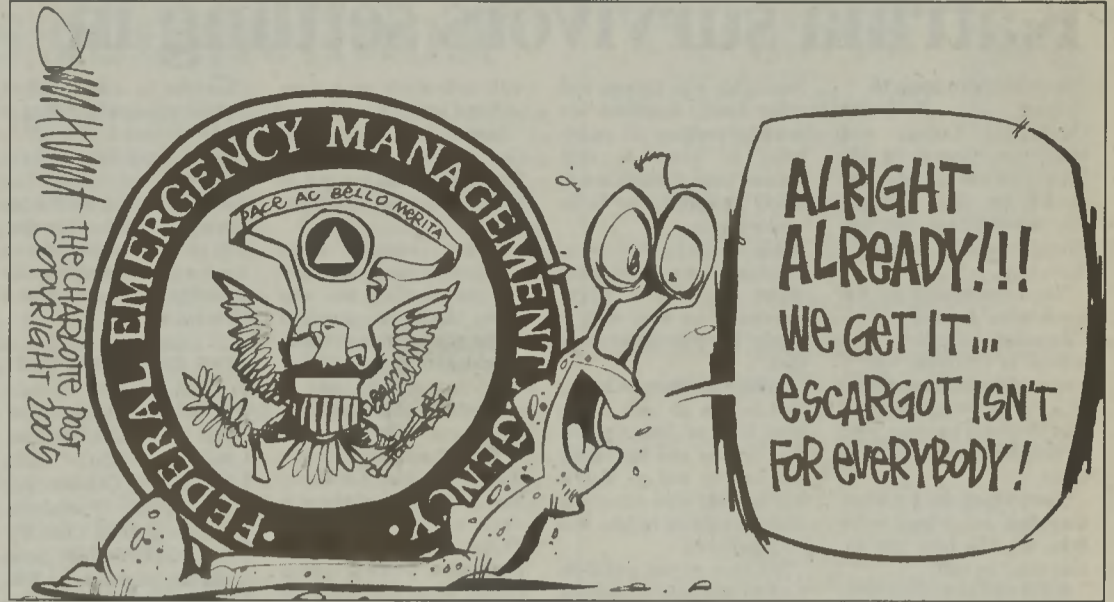
What does this inequality look like on the ground? Kozol has spent a lifetime working with children in "apartheid schools" and writing about what he sees, and he has seen a lot: Moldy walls and cracked windows. Leaky ceilings patched with garbage bags. Cafeterias with rat infestations. Classrooms without enough desks for their crowded enrollments, or with elementary school-sized desks for older students. Schools without any safe place for children to play — although in many urban schools this may not matter anyway, since recess might now be taken away as a disciplinary tool, or has already been replaced by extra time spent drilling students for their standardized tests.

The physical differences in these segregated schools are immediately glaring, but gaps exist in everything from test scores to teacher preparation to the curriculums used and courses offered.

Kozol has also met with hundreds of children over the years who have told him in their own words what school segregation means to them. He received this letter from an 8-year-old student: "Dear Mr Kozol, we do not have the things you have. You have Clean things. We do not have. You have a clean bathroom. We do not have that. You have Parks and we do not have Parks. You have all the thing and we do not have all the thing... Can you help us?" Her classmates sent letters with their concerns too: "We have a gym but it is for lining up. I think it is not fair." "We don't have no gardens... no Music or Art... no fun places to play. Is there a way to fix this Problem?" During a conversation he had with a group of high school students, one fifteen-year-old girl from Harlem told him, "It's like we're being hidden. It's as if you have been put in a garage where, if they don't have room for something but aren't sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don't need to think of it again."

Fifty years after Brown v. Board of Education, should millions of black and brown children still be attending schools where even 8-year-olds can see they don't have the "things" white children do, and where our children feel like America's discarded, forgotten trash? This was certainly never Dr. King's or anyone's dream.

But it is, as Jonathan Kozol says, our nation's shame. Bennettsville, S.C., native MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is CEO and Founder of the Children's Defense Fund.



MATTERS OF OPINION

What went wrong in New Orleans?



GEORGE E. CURRY

Undoubtedly, there will be official examinations of why the government — local, state and federal — performed so poorly in aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In the meantime, the New York Times and the Washington Post last Sunday published exhaustive accounts of the debacle, showing that as bad as we thought things had gone, they were far worse.

Katrina was only the fourth Category 5 hurricane in the nation's history. Last July, FEMA conducted a mock exercise in Louisiana for a Category 3 storm, called Pam. Even a weaker Category 3 storm would create damage of epic proportion, planners projected. The Washington Post reported, "Emergency planners had concluded that a real Pam would create a flood of unimaginable proportions, killing tens of thousands of people, wiping out hundreds of thousands of homes, shutting down southeast Louisiana for months."

The Post observed, "The practice run for a New Orleans apocalypse had been commissioned by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the federal government's designated disaster shop. But the funding ran out

and the doomsday scenario became just another prescient — but buried — government report."

According to the New York Times, "FEMA appears to have underestimated the storm, despite an extraordinary warning from the National Hurricane Center that it could cause 'human suffering incredible by modern standards.'" The agency dispatched only 7 of its 28 urban search and rescue teams to the area before the storm hit and sent no workers at all into New Orleans until after the hurricane passed on Monday, Aug. 29."

The Times account of the disaster captured the government chaos: "Federal Emergency Management Agency officials expected the state and city to direct their own efforts and ask for help as needed," the Times wrote. "Leaders in New Orleans, though, were so overwhelmed by the scale of the storm that they were not only unable to manage the crisis, but they were not always exactly sure what they needed. While local officials assumed that Washington would provide rapid and considerable aid, federal officials, weighing legalities and logistics, proceeded at a deliberate pace."

The Washington Post put it more bluntly.

"Compounding the natural catastrophe was a man-made one: the inability of the federal state and local governments to work together in the face of a disaster long forecast.

"In many cases, resources that were available were not used, whether Amtrak trains that could have taken evacuees to safety before the storm or the U.S. military's 82nd Airborne division, which spent days on standby waiting for orders that never came. Communications were so impossible that the Army Corps of Engineers was unable to inform the rest of the government for crucial hours that the levees in New Orleans had been breached."

According to the Post, "Despite pleas by Bush administration officials to refrain from 'the blame game,' mutual recriminations among officeholders began even before New Orleans' trapped residents had been rescued. The White House secretly debated federalizing authority in a city under the control of a Democratic mayor and governor, and critics in both parties assailed FEMA and raised questions about President Bush."

The department of Health and Human Services did not declare the Gulf Coast a public health emergency until two days after the storm.

The bureaucratic bungling didn't stop there, according to the Washington Post.

"...While the last regularly scheduled train out of town had left a few hours earlier, Amtrak had decided to run a 'dead-head' train that evening to move equipment out of the city. It was headed for high ground in Macomb, Miss., and it had room for several hundred passengers.

"We offered the city the opportunity to take evacuees out of harm's way," said Amtrak spokesman Cliff Black. "The city declined."

The Times recounted, "William D. Vines, the former mayor of Fort Smith, Ark., helped deliver food and water to areas hit by the hurricane. But he said FEMA halted two trailer trucks carrying thousands of bottles of water to Camp Beauregard, near Alexandria, La., a staging area for the distribution of supplies.

"FEMA would not let the trucks unload," Mr. Vines said in an interview. "The drivers were stuck for several days on the side of the road about 10 miles from Camp Beauregard. FEMA said we had to have a 'tasker number.' What in the world is a tasker number? I have no idea. It's just paperwork, and it's ridiculous."

Equally ridiculous was how FEMA handled skilled people eager to help.

"Hundreds of firefighters, who responded to a nationwide call for help in the disaster, were held by the federal agency in Atlanta for days of training on community relations and sexual harassment before being sent on to the devastated area."

This was ridiculous and heads need to roll.

GEORGE E. CURRY is editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publisher Association News Service. He appears on National Public Radio as part of "News and Notes with Ed Gordon."

A time for blacks to act here, abroad

Too often I see black people lying down and allowing others to walk on them.

In many instances we simply accept whatever is doled out from so-called powers-that-be, and end up only complaining about it when it's all said and done. We have proof positive that



JAMES CLINGMAN

we are discriminated against and mistreated in other ways, but we only talk about it, march about it, or ask folks to apologize for their transgressions. We participate in and even promote and perpetuate ridiculously flawed "economic inclusion" programs, succumbing to the notion that we are "minorities" and therefore, in order to be treated fairly we must subject ourselves to being "certified" and validated before we can obtain work paid for by our own tax dollars. Why won't we take action commensurate to the problems we face?

I read an article that described how 300 black contractors in St. Louis, Mo., who were literally fed up with how they were being treated, protested by blocking

Interstate 70. While 100 of them were arrested, their actions spoke so loudly and clearly that positive change began to take place. A similar incident took place across the river from St. Louis, in East St. Louis, when a group of angry contractors threatened to block an interstate highway there. Their threat was all it took to get things moving in their direction and brought instant concessions from the so-called powers-that-be.

In Nigeria, protesters, angry at the way Chevron and Shell are treating them and Nigeria's oil resources, are taking matters in their own hands by putting their bodies in the way of oil production. The locals say the big oil companies and other multinational organizations (I wonder who they could be?) are "colluding to keep the spoils for themselves," according to a report on National Public Radio. Apparently, actions taken by the Nigerians have certainly gotten the attention of a lot big wigs. One Nigerian told a Chevron official that the crude oil belonged to Nigeria and the primary benefits from that oil should go to Nigerians. As I often point out, not only ownership but also control of income-produc-

ing assets are vital to our success.

Everyday in this country, black people are mistreated in some form or fashion by the Establishment. We see it; we feel it; and we know it happens. Sadly, in most cases we merely talk about it; we seldom really do anything about it. We refuse to take matters into our own hands by risking something to secure our demands. We love to talk about Dr. King and what he stood for, but we are not willing to do what he did to achieve the ideals he espoused. Yes, he was non-violent, but his resolve to make change subjected him to violence from violent people. Nonetheless, he took action.

Are we just too afraid to do what must be done for our survival in this country? Are we satisfied with our condition? Are we unwilling to place ourselves in the line of fire in order to gain the rights and privileges of a people who helped build this country and create the wealth it enjoys from our labor? Will we go down in history as a people that gave in to discrimination, abuse, mistreatment, and unfairness, unwilling to fight for what is rightfully ours? Thus far, it looks that way.

Look around and see how we remove ourselves from the fight for justice for our brothers and sisters. Observe how we cower in the presence of white folks. Watch as our so-called leaders smile and acquiesce to wrongdoing by this country's political establishment. Monitor the results we get versus the results others get from legislation and programs put forth to help "minorities."

You will see, if you are willing to look, an array of disparities, a veritable laundry list of inequities that occur each day against black people, with impunity I might add, all while we just look on and wonder when things will change. The bad news is they won't change just because they ought to. The good news is they can be changed if we are willing to resort to tactics such as those by the groups I mentioned.

Nonviolent but radical action must be taken by black people in this country in order to effect change. That means we must put ourselves back on the front lines for justice. We must physically stop construction projects if we are not included in the planning and their resulting benefits.

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