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Caught Between Hope and Despair: An Essay Review

Jim Horn

Cambridge College

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The year after the Hampton-schooled Booker T. Washington bowed before a cheering white audience at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition and acknowledged that “the wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly,” the U. S. Supreme Court legalized the second class citizenship of African-Americans with the 7-1 decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson*, which institutionalized racism on a grand scale and brought a halt to black progress everywhere in America for generations to come. By 1920, a black man or woman somewhere in the South was being lynched at the rate of one per week, and by the middle of that decade when social tensions related to

Hope and despair in the American city

Why there are
no bad schools
in Raleigh



Gerald Grant

immigration and the waves of black migration to the North reached their zenith, the Ku Klux Klan boasted a membership of 5 million—15 percent of the eligible American population (*New World Encyclopedia*, 2009). By 1930, thirty states had embraced eugenics and passed laws mandating sterilization for many moral and criminal offenses, all of which were thought to be inherited and, thus, a potential threat to the sanctity and perfection of the Caucasian “germ plasm” (Black, 2003).

Gerald Grant earned his PhD at Harvard, having studied with David Riesman. Prior to that he worked as a journalist for the Washington Post. Long-time member AERA. He is retired from Syracuse University.

One year before Gerald Grant’s father bought his first house in Syracuse, New York, in 1927, Michigan took steps to contain the growing migration of blacks and the continuing waves of foreign immigrants by fixing the city boundaries of Detroit, a policy that would be emulated by other state legislatures seeking to limit areas inhabited by minorities. In so doing, public policy served to inspire the incorporation of outlying villages and towns intent on remaining white, even as the urban cores that these villages surrounded further darkened in skin color and diminished in that priceless commodity called hope.

Individual and private business efforts to ensure minority containment and segregation in housing became institutionalized. First were the regulations by the Depression-era Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) with its Residential Security Maps. Then, following WWII, the Federal Housing Authority used maps to create color-coded property “red-lining” policies intended to bar financing and restrict insurance coverage for residential areas with “inharmonious racial and nationality groups”:

Its [FHA’s] guidelines stipulated that rigid white-black separation must be maintained: “If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes” (Grant, 2009, p. 18).

Incredibly, FHA’s updated redlining maps were still in use when Gerald Grant moved his own family to Syracuse in 1978, as Grant found out when he first tried to buy

homeowner's coverage in an integrated neighborhood. These and other grievous breaches in human decency become historical prelude to Gerald Grant's central focus on a potent mode of social capital building in *Hope and despair in the American city: Why there are no bad schools in Raleigh*, a book written with a cultural historian's sensibility and a sociologist's respect for solid data.

In a time when it is forgivable and even fashionable to advocate for segregated charter schools as the only alternative for parents trapped by poverty, lack of opportunity, and the malignant neglect of their public school¹ it is a rare and beautiful thing to encounter a book that evenly and honestly provides solid empirical evidence—evidence that, despite the lessons of history that we continue to ignore at our own peril, high-quality public schools could be available to all classes and races of children in America to

¹ According to today's education reformers now bobbing about on a sea of government and corporate foundation cash, everything about public schooling would seem to deserve disrupting and/or replacing, except for the unmentioned and accelerating school resegregation that has picked up steam over the past two decades of fixation on testing and accountability, thanks largely to a growing insensitivity by the Courts to arguments for integrated schooling and integrated living. As recent reports have documented (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, Wang, 2010; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010) the reformers' preferred charter choice option, in fact, regularly guarantees no choice when it comes to attending either an intensely segregated school or one that is wholly apartheid. It is worth noting that while this kind of charter school "innovation" with no regard to racial or economic composition is given high point value (40) in evaluating state grant applications in the Race to the Top contest, there are no points awarded for plans, innovative or otherwise, to create diverse schools or to challenge the predominance of segregated schools and classrooms.

choose if we were to exhibit the moral and political will to make it so. Gerald Grant's *Hope and despair in the American city* offers us, then, an antidote to our present-day detached recidivism on civil rights, as it presents a close examination of racial and socioeconomic integration success in the schools of Wake County, North Carolina.

As the title suggests, however, there is reason enough to despair, too. Grant chooses his hometown of Syracuse as a prime example of a school system and community where hope has been largely extinguished by generations of political decisions and social policies that preserve and extend the dispossession of the disadvantaged. Unlike Wake County and Raleigh, which consciously chose to consolidate city schools with the county system in 1976, Syracuse followed the more common frozen boundary model of Detroit, which accelerated white flight during school desegregation efforts of the 1970s. Whereas consolidated governing bodies have been more likely to adopt zoning policies that spread affordable housing across a larger region and to create school districts with poor, middling, and wealthy families included, cities with restrictive boundaries like Syracuse have experienced shrinking tax bases and the disappearance of good jobs, all the while contending with increasing need for social services to deal with the attendant problems of increasing poverty. Whereas Detroit and Syracuse score 85 and a 62, respectively, on an urban segregation index (total apartheid=100), Raleigh scores a 42 (p. 30).

The consolidation of Wake County and Raleigh schools did not make the new system immune, however, to the problems of population growth, suburban sprawl, and resistance to busing. During the 1980s when Wake's population increased by more than 40 percent, it was the remarkable expansion of choice through magnet schools that Grant sees as making Wake County's school integration model sustainable. In just one year following school consolidation, 27 elementary schools were converted to magnet schools, and by the next year all were filled and racially balanced. No downtown schools had to be closed, and school officials began a renovation boom, accompanied by new school leadership

initiatives and teacher recruitment efforts aimed at attracting creative and highly-qualified teachers for the wide variety of magnet school offerings.

By 2006, fifty of the 122 schools in the system were theme-based magnet schools of choice, serving as laboratories for innovative approaches and as drawing cards for middle class parents to schools that, otherwise, would likely exceed Wake's 40 percent cap established in 2000 on low income students per school. By acknowledging the body of research that shows "income or class trumps race as a determinant of academic achievement" (p. 166), and by shifting in 2000 to a socioeconomic integration plan and away from the original plan based on seeking racial balance, Wake County was able to anticipate and sidestep later rulings by the U. S. Supreme Court that effectively eviscerated efforts to integrate schools based on race. The criteria Wake County would come to use to assign children became based on socioeconomic status, racial diversity, and achievement, and the fair re-distribution of social capital have since allowed all curriculum, instruction, and assessment loaves to rise in Wake County. As a result, most parents and teachers conclude that "there are no bad schools in Wake County." Grant, a longtime student of James Coleman's research, uses what he has found in Raleigh to conclude that "social capital is the yeast that makes a good school rise" (p. 120).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Wake County began charting a course toward integrated schooling and a fairer redistribution of social capital, those "human relationship and supportive networks that enrich the cognitive and social development of children and sustain the norms of a good community" (pp. 43-44). Wake was also seeking vastly improved educational achievement for all as a way to bring economic prosperity by attracting new businesses to the acres of piney woodlands ambitiously labeled the Research Triangle. In the meantime, urban centers like Syracuse and Detroit remained unwilling or unable to consider annexation or school consolidation as roads leading out of segregation, racial animosity, and the continuing decline of school achievement that can be counted on to remain inversely proportionate to the rising levels of poverty in any

community. In contained urban communities like Detroit, desegregation efforts became linked to busing across district lines to achieve racial balance, since there were not enough white children in Detroit to achieve any meaningful integration. Syracuse's intra-district experiment during the late 1960s had failed due to this same kind of shortage of white students.

The Detroit Plan was based on a desegregation order by the federal courts for Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, a plan that had withstood challenges all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court in 1971 in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. Resistance to desegregation and two-way busing outside Detroit in Wayne County and across Michigan was fierce, however, and by the time the case reached the Supreme Court in 1974, the Detroit case of *Milliken v. Bradley* was set to become a watershed case for desegregation efforts nationwide.

Grant's book should be required reading for present and potential school board members, as well as for any history or policy course on American education, if for no other reason than the recounting of how Nixon and his White House cabal of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Mitchell instituted a segregationist and anti-busing litmus test for any judge to be considered for appointment to the Federal bench, including the U. S. Supreme Court. For Nixon and his aides, their litmus test would be applied, of course, before any potential judge ever faced the lights of a Senate confirmation hearing. To get to the hearing, in fact, potential judges had to be on the side of segregated schools and segregated public housing. Grant shares transcripts from the Nixon's White House taping system to show Nixon's active complicity in killing busing within or across districts for the purpose of school integration:

Nixon was making sure the he would not have to ask any nominee about his stand on busing, while directing Mitchell and key aides to apply that test to any potential appointment they brought to the president's desk. Because of the possible retirement of a second justice,

Mitchell suggested to Nixon that he might make a "double play."

Nixon: Well, even then I don't want a liberal.

Mitchell: Oh no, no.

Nixon: I don't want a liberal.

Mitchell: Absolutely not.

Nixon: I just feel so strongly about that, I mean, when I think what the busing decisions have done to the South, and what it could do with de facto busing [in the North].

Mitchell: I agree.

Before Mitchell left, Nixon underlined his instructions once again: "I want you to have a specific talk with whatever man you consider. And I have to have an absolute commitment from him on busing and integration. I really have to. Go out and tell 'em that we totally respect his right to do otherwise, but if he believes otherwise, I don't want to appoint him to the Court."

Nixon got the Court he wanted. The four justices he appointed—replacing liberal judges of the Warren Court, including Chief Justice Earl Warren himself, along with Abe Fortas, Hugo Black, and John Marshall Harlan—radically changed the direction of the U. S. Supreme Court and provided the majority to stop desegregation at the city line in the North. The Warren Court had ordered desegregation of city and suburbs in Charlotte in 1968, but Nixon's Court refused to do so in 1974 in Detroit (pp. 151-152).

The 5-4 decision to strike down Detroit's inter-district desegregation plan helped to seal the fate of urban desegregation efforts nationwide, while demonstrating a willingness by the new Nixon Court majority to flex its judicial muscle for the cause of segregation. By the middle of the next decade, the traceable resegregation of American schools had begun in earnest, and for the past twenty years that pace has only quickened.

Since Grant published his book last year, elections in Wake County have brought big changes to the composition of the

school board. With the financial and campaign help of national players in the Tea Party movement, conservatives against Wake County's socioeconomic diversity plan have gained a majority—yes, a 5-4 majority. They used that majority on March 23, 2010 in a party line vote to shut down the diversity program that took 35 years to build and to return to assigning children based on a neighborhood schools model. A poll of Wake County citizens on March 29 showed 47 percent against the Board's action and 42 percent in favor.

Gerald Grant captures the contrasting education systems of Syracuse and Raleigh through a social scientist's alternating macro and micro lens with the added feature of an historian's depth of field. Grant does not shy away from a clear view of the broken communities and shattered dreams that resulted as bad urban planning brought more destruction than renewal. Nevertheless, the story he tells remains ascendant for its documentary treatment of hope's persistence across time and place and for its evidentiary appeal to common sense in practice by citizens who would not trade the hard, hostile road toward social justice for the wide, slick path of least resistance. Those who read Grant's book will be inspired to begin, to begin again, or to continue what began many years ago as the good and hard work toward a democratic republic with thousands of Wake County public school systems to replace the broken Detroit and Syracuses that today's corporate reformers continue to administer with unproven or failed remedies that threaten the welfare of all.

Grant concludes thus:

. . . this tale of two American cities is not just about test scores. It's about the kind of nation we hope to become. We should not want, nor shall we ever achieve, a nation of equal test scores or equal incomes. But we need to decide whether we want schools segregated by race and class, or schools that provide equal opportunity for all children—schools where students are enriched by relationships and ways

of thinking that help them break out of the boxes of race and class that our flawed history has constructed. Do we believe in a nation that welcomes all comers, provides a level playing field in all its public schools, relishes the clash of ideas, and, as a consequence, enjoys one of the highest rates of upward mobility in the world? Raleigh's reinvention of the ideals of the American common school made it an exemplar of those dreams and hopes (p. 191).

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About the Reviewer

Jim Horn is the keeper of *Schools Matter*, a blog devoted to the preservation and renewal of public education in America. He is also Associate Professor of Ed Leadership and Foundations at Cambridge College. He has over three decades of experience as a K-12 educator and professor of social foundations and qualitative research. His theoretical research agenda focuses on understanding complexity in educational systems, and his applied research ranges from exploring teacher renewal to understanding the effects of high stakes testing and privatization in urban school settings. He is strongly committed to renewing the democratic purposes of public education, and he advocates for the social justice mission of schools here and abroad.



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Editors
Gene V Glass
Gustavo Fischman
Melissa Cast-Brede
