

## **Center on Race and Social Problems Commemorates *Brown v. Board of Education***

On Friday, May 7, 2004, the Center on Race and Social Problems in the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work, in partnership with Duquesne University, held a day-long conference commemorating the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The conference program consisted of presentations by four national speakers as well as a panel discussion featuring local educators and education policy experts. Approximately 500 people attended the event. The main points the speakers and panelists made are summarized below.

### **National Speakers**

**Dr. Gary Orfield**, director of the Harvard Project on School Desegregation and the founding director of the Harvard Civil Rights Project, provided several insights into the *Brown* decision and its consequences. He emphasized the slowness of the desegregation process, pointing out that it wasn't until the late 1960's and early 1970's that the Southern schools began to become integrated. He went on to explain that the pace of this implementation was unique to the *Brown* case, since most rights are granted immediately. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, he said, served to bring the *Brown* case to fruition on a greater scale as it made the federal government a party to enforcing the decision.

According to Dr. Orfield, there was almost total school segregation in the past. Now, 80 percent of the population lives in urban areas, and school segregation is determined by where people live.

He pointed out that in 1973 the Supreme Court declared no federal right to education or to equal funding of education. He proceeded to inform the audience that the *Brown* desegregation policy only dealt with intradistrict desegregation, failing to address segregation in greater metropolitan areas. To deal with this, some regions were desegregated by creating larger districts, as was the case in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Some of the important educational gains for African Americans since the 1950's were then discussed. At the time of the *Brown* decision, only 25 percent of African American students completed high school. Today, their graduation rates are about three times as high; access to college for African American students has increased, too.

Dr. Orfield also noted that although the progress of integration was evident earlier on in the aftermath of *Brown*, an unfortunate shift has occurred in the United States. The integration of schools that was long fought for in the wake of *Brown* has shifted, and more districts are demonstrating a resegregation trend. This was said to be owing in part to the growing immigrant population, particularly of Latinos and Asians, as well as the spread of racial residential segregation. Even in the face of this unfortunate backsliding, surveys have demonstrated a compelling interest in having diversity in schools, which has been shown to enrich students' learning experience and was valued by many student groups.

Dr. Orfield noted that Brown managed to get African American students into the White schools, but it didn't guarantee an equal education once they got there.

**Dr. James Comer**, professor of child psychiatry in the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center, discussed *Brown* from the unique perspective of someone with a child development background. He began by discussing some basic notions about the spirit of *Brown* being equal opportunity through desegregation. Then he explored what he thought was necessary to achieve equal educational opportunities. He does support integration where possible, and he also acknowledged that the issue is much more complex than having African American and White students attend the same school building. Integration is also about complex human interactions, including issues of class, race, etc. With his career focus and vast knowledge and experience related to child development, he educated the audience on its importance for all children.

Dr. Comer stressed the need for schools to provide extra support for students from dysfunctional homes and communities. He also noted that students need structure in life and in schools. He recommended that school management engage in team planning for the social and academic growth of the school. Following the above suggestions can have outstanding results. North Carolina schools, for instance, saw their low-income and often low-achieving students from public housing projects increase their levels of academic proficiency from 42 percent to 97 percent. He closed by stressing what he considers to be most valuable—teachers helping children develop, and he stated that Educational Extension Services, along the lines of the Agricultural Extension Service, can help teachers to do that. Dr. Comer's newest publication, *Leave No Child Behind*, expands on some of these issues.

**Dr. Abigail Thernstrom**, a senior fellow of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, stated that *Brown* remains a luminous moment in U.S. history because of its importance in ending the caste system in this country. Dr. Thernstrom believes that racial concentration is not segregation and that learning is not necessarily compromised by students attending schools where the majority of students are from their own race. She went on to point out that the school can't change demographics and that busing causes children to lose valuable instructional time.

Dr. Thernstrom voiced her concern about the racial achievement gap in the United States and declared that it is this country's current number one social justice problem. She informed the audience about the shifts in the racial gap over the last several decades—pointing out that the gap was closing from 1971 to 1988 and then widened once again from 1988 to today. She thinks that African American cultural factors contribute significantly to the achievement gap. *No Excuses*, a book that she coauthored with her husband, expands on her perspectives.

**Ms. Kati Haycock**, director of the Education Trust, gave an informative PowerPoint presentation that detailed significant data, some of which are incorporated in the following summary.

National Assessment of Education Progress statistics show that African American 17-year-olds read and do math at the same levels as White 13-year-olds. Graduation rates also demonstrate a gap between African American and White students: Of every 100 White kindergartners, 93

graduate from high school, 65 complete at least some college, and 33 obtain at least a bachelor's degree by ages 25-29. Of every 100 African American kindergartners, 87 graduate from high school, 50 complete at least some college, and 18 obtain at least a bachelor's degree.

Looking at why students display poor achievement, adults often say the causes are poverty, their parents don't care, they come to school without breakfast, there are not enough books, and there are not enough parents. Some students, on the other hand, blame themselves, and some say that some teachers don't know their subjects, counselors underestimate their potential, principals dismiss their concerns, and expectations are too low.

Ms. Haycock provided some exciting statistics on high-achieving poor and minority schools, districts, and states. For example, West Manor Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia, has a student body makeup that is 99 percent African American and 80 percent low-income. Their students outscored 98 percent of Georgia's elementary schools in second-grade reading in 2002 and 90 percent of Georgia's elementary schools in second-grade math in 2002. Another example she provided was Hambrick Middle School in Aldine, Texas, with a student population that is 94 percent African American and Latino (vs. 56 percent for the state of Texas) and 85 percent low-income (vs. 50 percent for the state of Texas). They have performed in the top fifth of all Texas middle schools in both reading and math in both seventh and eighth grades during a three-year period. She also provided data on districts and even states that have reduced or eliminated the achievement gap.

To reduce achievement gaps Ms. Haycock said policy makers should focus more attention and resources on quality prekindergarten programs and remedying the funding gap, since districts serving concentrations of poor children need more support, not less. Overhauling teacher policy is important and should seek to incorporate higher standards for entry, more supports during induction, higher pay for higher performers, fewer protections for low performers, and incentives to teach where they are needed the most.

The role educators play in improving education includes getting all students into rigorous curriculum courses with more rigorous assignments. A challenging curriculum results in lower failure rates, even for the lowest achievers. A strong high school curriculum equals higher college completion.

Below is the link to Haycock's presentation:

<http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/E29385C2-51D2-4172-9033-7D2F2F03AF2E/0/univpittbrown2004.ppt>

## **Panel Discussion**

Panelists were local and included University of Pittsburgh alumna **Dr. Helen Faison**, director of the Pittsburgh Teachers Institute; **William Isler**, president of the Board of Directors of the Pittsburgh Public Schools; **Dr. Janet Schofield**, Pitt professor of psychology and senior scientist in the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center; and **Dr. John Thompson**, superintendent of the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Chris Moore, a producer and host for WQED Multimedia, was the panel moderator.

**Maxwell King**, president of the Heinz Endowments, provided introductory comments. He asked the question, "Are we really committed to an egalitarian society?" and proceeded by saying that we need to have a catalog of actions that we can do to reach our goals in our diverse society. After introducing the panelists, moderator Chris Moore set forth the outline for the discussion. First, panelists would answer scripted questions, and then they would entertain questions from the audience.

The following summary of the panel discussion contains paraphrases and some direct quotations.

Chris Moore: To what extent are segregation and underachievement problems for students in Pittsburgh today, and why do they continue to exist?

Dr. Helen Faison: Our issues today are even more daunting than they were 50 years ago, especially the racial achievement gap. This is partially owing to the state of education before 1954. We do not have easy answers. We need to stop concerning ourselves with things relating to homes, etc., that we cannot control and focus on that which we can control, such as teacher quality, good leadership, and adequate support.

William Isler: It was three years into my five years on the Board of Directors for the Pittsburgh Public Schools before we finally asked the right question: Is the educational gap because of race or economics, and the answer is overwhelmingly racial. In the past, we were trying to say that it was more economic. The main point is that we finally asked the right question so that we could understand the data we needed to know but didn't want to hear. Then when it was out there, we needed to do something about it. Next we need to ask, "Is it getting better, and what else can we do?"

Dr. Janet Schofield: Pittsburgh has the advantage of being a diverse school district. About 56 percent of its students are African American and most of the rest are White. This means that there is a good balanced ratio of African American students to White students, which leads to the possibility of real integration that other districts don't have. Many districts don't take advantage of this, and they have resegregation occurring, even within the same school building. This often happens for two reasons. The first is school policy, such as academic tracking. This has a valuable purpose, but we must think creatively to achieve the same learning goals in other ways, such as changing the pipeline leading students into the tracks. We can also provide support for students lagging behind to help them rise into the higher-level tracks. The second is students choosing to socially segregate by race. Schools do have some responsibility for how students socially segregate themselves. Students make friends in the more segregated elementary schools and then they tend to keep those friends through the years, even in more integrated middle and high schools.

Dr. John Thompson: I'm not from Pittsburgh. I came here as an outsider. Superintendents move around a lot. I was blessed to have helped in successful school districts before coming here. Traveling to Pittsburgh as an outsider, I saw all of the amenities, resources, and diversity the city had to offer. I thought that this was a place where, if anyone can do it, it can be done here. "Once I stepped into the city coming from the South, I went up South." Pittsburgh invented

ways to resegregate the schools by having neighborhood schools and K-8 schools. The intent of the law of *Brown* has not been met. Even when we did desegregate the schools, we didn't integrate the schools. We found ways to desegregate and we still leave poor children behind. We need to find ways to truly desegregate the schools as soon as possible.

Chris Moore: What needs to be done to close the gap?

Dr. John Thompson: Until you have a world-class teacher committed to every child, it will continue. Some structural components are important too, such as having the same curriculum across schools of the same level, having the same vision, a focused school system, data that you can disaggregate to the individual student, and stopping the protection of ineffective teachers. The unions have "handcuffed" the school system and protected teachers so well.

Chris Moore: Unions are responding to bad management decisions.

Dr. Helen Faison: Teachers have privileges from unions. Remember why they are needed: They, too, want schools to be high-achieving. The problem is deciding how to do that. You must have highly qualified teachers. [She then related a story about a parent who came to many board meetings complaining about the teachers. One response to the parent was that the teachers were all certified. The parent's retort was, "They are certified, but they aren't qualified."] Quality teachers know what they teach (content), how to teach (pedagogy), and how students respond to teaching, since the teachers will have taken child and adolescent psychology classes. Highly qualified teachers are difficult to measure beyond those three things, though they will have respect for the children and their families and high expectations for all students, will not use the student's background and living conditions as excuses for the student not doing his or her best, and will be able to deal well with diversity and model appropriate behavior for the children.

William Isler: For the board, we need the best resources and the best superintendent. We need to bring in community resources, such as the University of Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC), School of Education, and School of Social Work. LRDC wasn't used for a while at local districts, and now it is. There was a lot of mistrust. We have to get over that and work together.

Chris Moore: That's a Pittsburgh thing.

William Isler: We have to get over that. We can't afford to do that anymore. We have to look at all of the resources. We have to respect parents and tell them what we are doing and why. The best schools are welcoming to parents. We also must be open to the community.

Chris Moore: What is the strength of Black institutions, having been there?

Dr. Janet Schofield: I see both sides of the issue. On one hand, there is tremendous strength in these schools. There is a very real place for them and their contributions. On the other hand, we also live in a diverse society, and people need to feel comfortable functioning in the larger society. [She told a story about an African American woman who only attended predominantly African American schools and turned down a job at a bank with a largely White staff because of

her discomfort in that environment.] We all need experience in mixed environments, and there is a role for the predominantly Black schools too.

Chris Moore: We have heard people complaining about diversity being shoved down their throats. What do you think about that?

Dr. Helen Faison: In Pittsburgh, we have such little real diversity that we don't think it matters.

William Isler: There isn't enough diversity in our neighborhoods. Our communities are not diverse, so our schools aren't. Magnets are good, but then the money dried up, and we didn't do any more. Another concern is that we don't hear enough about the positive things in the district; we love it when students come to our meetings and talk about their experiences in our schools.

Dr. Janet Schofield: I think education is all about pushing your boundaries and learning things we didn't know before. I think people object to diversity because it isn't always easy to interact with others, so they are uneasy or scared because they don't know how to handle it. Saying that they don't need it means that they do, but that they are just uncomfortable.