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Brown v. Board of Education at 65: A Promise Unfulfilled

I grew up in New York City, where I attended public schools between 2000 and 2012, interrupted by brief periods in other cities as my parents moved around. The brief sojourns in schools outside New York City opened my eyes. Schools in America are by no means equal, but the sources of inequality differ from what most people think. I learned from schools in Binghamton, New York and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, that parents and teachers can work together to help students behave properly and succeed academically.

Most of the time, however, I attended schools beset by disciplinary problems. When I acted out in the schools in Binghamton and Winston-Salem, the teachers called my parents, and I settled down. Nothing like that happened in the other schools. But by grade 9, I had my own ideas about what school was good for. I wanted to learn, and learning was always more difficult when disruption ruled.

In September 2008, I arrived with my stepfather at John Adams High School in South Ozone Park, Queens to complete my registration for fall classes. Several hours later, I watched from a table at the perimeter of the cafeteria as members of the “Crip” gang pounced a young man sporting the colors of the rival “Blood” gang. I had just received my lunch.

Incidents like these were common at John Adams, where according to the New York State Education Department, only 64% of students graduate in four years. Just two percent more (66%) graduate in six years. Violence, gang activity, and classroom disruptions were the John Adams experience. The high school was something like a poorly run prison, where the inmates intimidate the guards. Every morning, we walked through metal detectors, at the end of which stood a New York City Public Safety officer, wand in hand, waiting to scan us again. It was annoying but plainly necessary.

Classes could be disrupted at any moment by late arriving students who paid no price for tardiness. Students dipped into classes in which they weren’t registered to escape our Vice Principal’s infamous “Hall Sweeps.” Hall Sweeps collected late students, quarantining them in a lecture room on the third floor to avoid classroom disruptions.

Class clowns heckled instructors incessantly, but others laced their jeering with threats of physical harm and racial epithets. When the situation got seriously out of control, teachers called the unarmed police officers assigned to the school and the school administrators. Their arrival usually escalated the situation by giving the student occasion to put on a show for his friends. By the time the student was hauled off and the flipped desks set right, the bell signaling the end of class rang. So much for instruction.

I recall these anecdotes every time I hear people decry black and Latino students’ alarmingly high suspension and expulsion rates. In 2015, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio issued rules requiring school officials to receive permission from the New York City Education Department to suspend students. Recently, the California Senate passed a measure (SB 419; 30-8) forbidding public schools from suspending students in grades four through eight who willfully defy school staff. The bill was supported by legislators alarmed that although black students account for 5.6% of California’s students, they receive twenty percent of all suspensions in the state. Similar measures trailed the Obama administration’s 2014 guidelines seeking to curb “racial disparities” in school disciplinary proceedings. Proponents of these measures argued that, because black students are “disparately impacted” by school suspensions, our nation’s school systems are hotbeds of racial discrimination.

This disparate impact theory is a fantasy. Violence and lack of order in underserved schools deprives all students of their rightful educational opportunities. Catering to the disruptors by keeping them in the classrooms—or halls, cafeterias, or wherever they choose to hang out—is a terrible idea. I don't know whether suspending such students will teach them the value of education, but leaving them in the school to disrupt everyone else's education is a travesty. I know. I've attended such schools, and I've also attended schools that maintain reasonable order. The difference has nothing to do with race, except in the sense that some people believe that it is a benefit to minority communities to allow their schools to become ungovernable.

At John Adams High School, Obama-era policies restricting school discipline unleashed a torrent of new problems. When I visited weeks after I graduated college in 2016, I saw how students' behavior had worsened. Students strutted the hallways cocooned in noise-cancelling headphones and texting. The staircases reeked of marijuana. Teachers and staff were like ants trying to manage traffic in Times Square.

The impression I formed in 2016 was reinforced when, just weeks after my visit, the *New York Post* reported that a new "hands-off attitude" was allowing John Adams' students to "run wild." According to the article, "they curse and threaten teachers, refuse to put away their cellphones, roam the halls, and openly deal drugs." That students cursed at and threatened teachers wasn't new to me, but cellphones in class and drug dealing in the stairwells was new. Also new was a principal's refusal to suspend a senior who made a sex tape with a freshman and passed it around to his friends. The principal, we were told, wanted to keep the numbers of suspensions down—as per the new rules.

This isn't "social justice." It is state-mandated foolishness. Keeping teen predators in school so that they can continue preying on vulnerable students doesn't bring educational opportunity to anyone. But that's what the campaign to undermine school discipline in minority communities has come to.

Why do urban schools tend to have more disciplinary problems than other schools? I don't have all the answers, but I know that the problem feeds on itself. In many cases, students are influenced by mainstream culture, which often encourages minority youth towards transgressive behavior. Let students feel they can get away with anything and some will try to find out just how far they can go. And when nothing happens to them, other students will misbehave as well. These problems are aggravated of course in communities with high rates of family dysfunction and other social problems. The root problem here is not racism. But even in the most afflicted communities, schools can be beacons of hope; fertile fields of potential from which the leaders of tomorrow will sprout and grow into the next generation of great Americans. Turning them into sanctuaries for bullies, early-career criminals, and gangs is unwise public policy and will stymie progress.

Our collective greatness has always come from Americans' willingness to ask more of ourselves and our communities; and from our shared optimism, which fuels our conviction that the mistakes of today won't decide our future. The Obama-era guidelines demand less of us. It's time we changed course.