Urban Life and Urban Landscape Series
Getting Around Brown

Desegregation, Development, and the Columbus Public Schools

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Maps on pp. xiv and 73 were drawn by William Nelson.

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For Dee Dee
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Introduction

It is both an axiom of American history and a staple of American mythology that, like a midcentury big bang, the enduring glory of Brown v. Board of Education rests in the moment of its inception. Some may challenge the 1954 ruling’s established status as the opening salvo of the “Second Reconstruction,” finding instead the first shot fired to be the desegregation of the armed forces or the murder of Emmett Till, or even maintaining that there was in fact no break in the struggle for civil rights. Others might argue that Brown’s blend of questionable legal and social science reasoning made it from the beginning a poor foundation on which to build a movement. Few, however, dispute the real and symbolic moral force of the event itself, the moment that a unanimous Supreme Court doomed the doctrine of “separate but equal” by declaring segregated public schools unconstitutional. It was, as J. Harvie Wilkinson observed, “among the most humane moments in all our history.”

As I began writing this book in the spring of 1994, America’s newsmagazines and editorial pages were filled with fortieth-anniversary reflections on Brown’s legacy. Reading them, I was struck less by their inevitable reverence—the strength of Thurgood Marshall, the savvy of Earl Warren, the bravery of the children—than by their inescapable melancholy. Unlike many such observances, the commemoration of Brown marked the birthday of a living process, not the memorial of a finite event. Instead of conveying the frozen beauty of youthful martyrdom, as too many felled giants of the Civil Rights movement do, Brown bears the baggage and blemishes of middle age.
Indeed, the midlife uncertainty that characterized the occasion seemed appropriate for a fortieth birthday. A product of the progressive optimism of baby boom America, Brown spent much of its adolescence in search of an identity. The massive resistance of an intransigent South left it largely powerless, and little school desegregation had taken place as late as the mid-1960s. It was not until the end of that decade that Brown truly came of age, exhibiting the impatient idealism of a generation convinced it could change the world. From 1968 to 1973, racial isolation in America’s public schools faced its most concentrated assault, with a series of Supreme Court rulings that spread school desegregation nationwide. As Brown grew older, however, its ambitions grew more limited, diminished by the inevitable compromises and disappointments of adulthood. Demographic trends, the bitter backlash against busing, the persistence of residential segregation, and other unforeseen forces undermined Brown’s arguably outsized confidence; by 1994, racial isolation in the public schools was actually increasing. As a result, the ruling that had embodied such promise at its inception found itself at forty confronting a problematic past and an uncertain future.

Desegregation as it was carried out in large, urban school districts proved a too unwieldy tool with which to reshape a fluid, flexible, and unpredictable set of circumstances. Unequal educational opportunity initially seemed an edifice to be smashed. But the line between public schools and private markets turned out to be not so bright, and it gradually became apparent that education is not the primary cause of racial inequality but one of its many interconnected contributors. Because scholars have too often isolated school desegregation from such significant sociopolitical forces as business community influence on education, metropolitan jurisdictional fragmentation, and the rise of the black middle class, the flaws of the current literature have come to mirror the failings of Brown itself. With desegregation now largely anathema to politicians and judges, as well as increasingly disdained by African Americans and liberal whites, new approaches are needed to address new problems. As the first historical case study to explore the interplay of business,
metropolitan development, and school desegregation, this book, I hope, will contribute to the development of a "postdesegregation" literature of desegregation.

I will argue that the desegregation of the Columbus, Ohio, public school system failed to ensure equal educational opportunity not because it was inherently detrimental to learning, but because it was intrinsically incompatible with the city's steady geographic and economic growth. Even before the first buses rolled in 1979, the threat of desegregation had redefined the parameters of single-family home building in the city, essentially turning the boundaries of the Columbus school district into a residential development redline. The myriad resources that typically follow new housing were both exiting and avoiding the city schools by desegregation's implementation; busing simply solidified and intensified this already extant process.

Moreover, because the borders of the city school district and the borders of the city had been diverging since 1965, suburban school systems had come to serve a major portion of Columbus by 1979. For the powerful, business-led "growth consensus" that had long shaped political and economic activity in the city, the existence of these "common areas"—the sections of Columbus served by suburban school systems—provided a development safety valve, disengaging Columbus's growth from the growth of the Columbus schools. In essence, the health of the city school district was sacrificed to preserve the expansion of the city itself. The gradual abandonment of urban education in Columbus has resulted in both the concentration of poor and African American students within the central city school district and the emergence of a politically powerful form of defensive activism within the area's overwhelmingly white suburban systems—a phenomenon I call "educational NIMBY." This potent combination makes Brown's promise of equal educational opportunity appear increasingly remote in Columbus.

Desegregation in Columbus provides an untapped case study that is both narratively rich and nationally resonant. The goal of this book is to combine both elements into a single story, to present not just a small slice of the Civil Rights movement but a vivid urban
Map 1. Columbus and Franklin County School Districts and the “Common Areas,” as of 1995
Source: Columbus Development Department

portrait as well. Still, the question remains, why a history of Columbus school desegregation? For scholars, such a chronicle offers a much-needed look at the desegregation of a large, northern urban district. Case studies of school desegregation above the Mason-Dixon line have focused almost exclusively on Boston, the still-
searing symbol of busing's racial volatility, while generally ignoring the far less dramatic—but no less important—desegregation plans implemented in hundreds of school systems across the North. As Columbus was one of the last districts to begin a sweeping, system-wide busing remedy, its history affords a unique summation of Brown's turbulent first quarter century. Moreover, the Columbus desegregation case, *Columbus Board of Education v. Penick*, proved the coda to a decade of controversial litigation, the Supreme Court's final declaration of its commitment to public school desegregation.

Perhaps even more intriguing to scholars than what Columbus reveals about the nation's recent educational past is what it suggests about America's urban future. Columbus's experience with school desegregation is at once unique and typical, a singular story with policy implications that reverberate far beyond the Buckeye State. The issues this book raises—the uneasy relationship between business and education, the incompatibility of urban schools and residential development, and the troubling educational ramifications of jurisdictional fragmentation, to name a few—are applicable to urban areas around the country. Columbus is just one of many American cities seeking politically and legally viable ways to maintain urban growth while improving urban education. Yet the vitriolic and occasionally violent history of school desegregation has chilled debate over the complex connections that race, class, and living patterns have to educational opportunity. Not until we honestly begin to reassess the politics of place can we adequately begin to address the problems of America's public schools.

I was a fifth grader in the Columbus schools when desegregation began in 1979, and I can still recall being ordered to evacuate Olde Orchard Elementary one gray October morning. At the time, I did not fully understand that what appeared to be an unexpected recess was actually something far more serious: a bomb threat directed at Tracey Duncan, my classmate and the daughter of the district court judge who had ordered the schools desegregated. A generation of students later, school desegregation remains a contentious and unresolved issue both in Columbus and around the
country. Unfortunately, all too often the debate is reduced to simplistic diagnoses and misguided prescriptions. By conveying the maddening complexity of the issues involved, I hope to illustrate the creativity required to address them. For if it is easy and accurate to assert that desegregation failed us, it is far more troubling—and no less accurate—to admit that we failed desegregation.