Epilogue: Demoralization and Decline

When Jim Hyre disclosed in April 1987 that he would be stepping down from the superintendency at the end of July, his announcement generated a hail of praise for the man many considered the catalyst of the city schools' resurgent confidence. “It’s not the result of fate or happenstance the district is in the best shape ever,” wrote one reporter. “Rather, it is a direct result of Hyre’s leadership.” “More than anyone else,” proclaimed the Dispatch, “Hyre is responsible for turning around the image of the Columbus Public School system.” Dispatch education writer Kathy Gray Foster called Hyre “a revered school leader,” adding that because of the outgoing superintendent, “People don’t look down on Columbus schools as they used to from their suburban perches. Many have realized that a good reputation for Columbus schools is important for the community as a whole.”

Accompanying the acclaim, however, was a more ominous undertone, an anxious murmur that the irrepressible Hyre would prove an irreplaceable superintendent. While Bill Moss praised Hyre for being “concerned about children getting an education—all children,” he worried that Hyre was abandoning the ship before it entered rough
waters. "Maybe the guy sees storm clouds on the horizon," Moss suggested, "and he's catching his hat. He might be saying 'I'm getting the devil out of there.'" Mayor Buck Rinehart was more direct, calling Hyre's departure "a tragic loss" that "could be devastating for the city of Columbus." "Jim Hyre has brought magic to this district," declared board member turned Business First publisher Carole Williams. But, she noted in her publication, his agenda lay unfinished. "The best tribute the city's business leadership can give to his down-to-earth greatness," she implored, "would be an increased corporate commitment to finding ways for this city's school district to fulfill Hyre's dream of it becoming the best urban school district in the nation. That will take an even greater corporate commitment and involvement of the roll-up-the-sleeves and dive in variety."

Indeed, for a time, such a commitment appeared imminent. In June 1987, M/I Schottenstein Homes unveiled plans to build two small subdivisions inside the boundaries of the Columbus school district, the first since the early 1970s. Six weeks later, developer Don Epler announced his intention to annex 182 acres of Jefferson Township farmland to Columbus for a 415-home subdivision called McNeill Farms. Because municipal annexation now meant automatic school territory transfer, McNeill Farms represented what Columbus schools spokesperson Laura Ecklar called "the first direct benefit to the school district since the [Win-Win] agreement was reached." "This underscores the reality, not the perception, that people are willing to invest in the school system," said interim superintendent Damon Asbury.

For over a year after Win-Win, Jim Hyre's forward-looking faith in the Columbus Public School District's competitiveness appeared as though it might be justified. From the start, however, the "House That Hyre Built" was a fragile structure, assembled on a base of slowly eroding resources and held together by both the superintendent's galvanizing leadership and the city's prosperity. Nervous school officials saw new home building as the cement that would
finally fill in the foundation. "We need the middle class housing starts that are planned," insisted government affairs supervisor Bob Barrow, "and we need them now."  

It soon became evident, however, that the influx of investment the district so desperately required would not materialize. Within two years after Hyre's departure, the real estate market had faltered, Epler's development had stalled, and M/I's new subdivisions had proven little more than successful anomalies. Meanwhile, changing economic circumstances, combined with a series of systemic traumas, arrested the district's delicate momentum. By the beginning of the 1990s, "the best urban school system in the nation" seemed like a sad memory, somewhere between willful masquerade and involuntary mirage. "The problem was that the district's PR was about a zillion times more successful than its product," said school board member Anne Hall. "We thought we could maybe bring up the system to match the PR. Instead, we let the PR come down to match the product. We knew there had to be movement. We just went the wrong way."  

When Win-Win was signed in 1986, the commentary that attended the agreement focused primarily on the impact it would have on the city and suburban school districts. Lost was the crucial fact that Win-Win fundamentally transformed desegregation from a development nuisance that private interests could easily avoid to a municipal growth obstacle that the city could no longer ignore. 

Before Penick, Columbus schools were largely a locational concern to area developers: where and how quickly can we build (segregated) neighborhood schools that will serve the city's burgeoning population? With the threat and implementation of desegregation, the schools became a development redline: where in Columbus can we build without having to deal with busing? Still, through 1985, the city's growth remained detached from that of the Columbus schools. By formally linking city and school district annexation for the first time in thirty years, however, Win-Win abruptly reunited
urban growth and urban education: how can Columbus continue to grow now that all new land automatically enters the (desegregated) city school system?

With little time to examine the Win-Win legislation before the General Assembly ratified it, city officials found themselves in a quandary. They could either keep quiet about their concerns and back the hard-won compromise, or they could criticize the agreement and risk reigniting the annexation controversy. They chose the former. “I’m saying [to myself], ‘We have a mess on our hands,’” then city council president Jerry Hammond recalled. “But because of my reluctance to take on the school board and say, ‘I think you’ve made a terrible mistake,’ we just said, ‘Okay, we understand what you’re saying, fine, very good,’ and never made an issue out of it.”

Said city council economic development aide Pete Cass, “The city got briefed on Win-Win the day before the legislature was ready to announce it. Quite frankly, city people were dumbfounded. They thought, ‘This is going to stop development in the city of Columbus.’” The most prominent figure to denounce Win-Win publicly was annexation attorney Harrison Smith, who warned, “I think the plan will substantially limit the growth of the city of Columbus. There will be no annexation for single-family development.”

For over a year, the city-school growth conflict remained in the background, obscured by the optimism of the M/I Homes and McNeill Farms announcements. During the fall of 1987, however, the facade of compatibility was suddenly and dramatically demolished by the seismic shock of Wexley. “Wexley” was the nickname quickly affixed to an enormous luxury housing development envisioned by Leslie Wexner, billionaire founder of The Limited, and his partner Jack Kessler, a prominent developer, civic booster, and Columbus North High School graduate. Using a number of innocuous front companies, Wexner and Kessler had quietly amassed over four thousand acres of gently rolling farmland in northeastern Franklin County’s Plain Township. On this bucolic property, they hoped to develop a community of unrivaled status in central Ohio, a superelitie village combining the tasteful, faux-rural elegance of the
equestrian set, the nouveau riche country-club lifestyle of Dublin's Muirfield Village, and the executive convenience—courtesy of newly completed I-670—of a ten-minute drive to the airport and a fifteen-minute commute downtown.

Before building their opulent idyll, Wexley developers first needed to ensure the provision of unglamorous but essential water and sewer services. In July, however, Columbus had innocently canceled an unused service contract that would have obligated it to supply Wexley with utilities. Unless they could market septic tanks as status symbols, the developers were left with three noisy, public, and controversial options for obtaining services: annex Wexley to Columbus and, consequently, to the Columbus schools; use Les Wexner's seemingly unlimited wealth to circumvent the city's water-sewer monopoly; or use the seemingly unlimited influence that accompanied Les Wexner's wealth to nudge the Columbus City Council into offering a new service contract to tiny Plain Township municipality New Albany. If the developers refused to annex to Columbus, it would represent an unambiguous rejection of the city school district. If they convinced the council to extend services without annexation, it would be a double snub, a rebuff of the city schools and an intentional evasion of Win-Win; and if they built their own water-sewer facilities or found services elsewhere, it could signal the sealing off of Columbus's ability to expand to the northeast. What appeared to be the simplest option of the three—annexing Wexley to the city of Columbus—was complicated by the antiurban obstructionism of Plain Township property owners and by the fact that the status of the city school district was irreconcilable with the dreams of the developers.

Involving at least nine separate governmental jurisdictions, innumerable political and economic interests, and, perhaps most important, the $2 billion behind Les Wexner, the efforts of Wexley developers to secure services became an extended media explosion that shook the entire central Ohio area. The convoluted controversy, described by reporter Herb Cook Jr. as "'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' meets '60 Minutes,'" took traditional American social
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fissures—black versus white, rich versus poor, rural versus urban—and jumbled them together. By the time it was settled, the controversy had also managed to pit rich against rich, rural against rural, black against black, and school board and city council members against each other. It took a year of remarkably elaborate political and legal machinations for the Wexley forces to get what they had wanted all along: to obtain Columbus services for the whole development while keeping the most expensive, elite lots out of the Columbus school district.

For all its complexity, the Wexley controversy sent two very clear messages to the Columbus school district. The first was that, despite the gains of the Hyre years, civic leaders still viewed the city school system as a growth liability. Summarizing Wexley's significance, Columbus school board member Rich Fahey said, "The question at the time was: 'How big of a player are we?' Are we a Triple A team in the big league? I mean, how are we going to get treated? What do we come out of this with? Do we have enough clout that we can demand it all? Obviously, we didn't."

An even more demoralizing message, however, was sent by the incredible determination of normally controversy-averse developers to keep their most valuable territory out of the Columbus schools. Rather than a dramatic investment in the supposedly resurgent city system, Wexley became a drawn-out saga that laid bare the rhetoric of the area's economic elite. By seeking so doggedly to see their executive lots served by the poor, white, rural Plain Local schools, the developers conveyed a signal to the Columbus board that seemed to say, "We'll take anything but you." In 1983, Plain Local had been rated the worst suburban school district in Franklin County by Columbus Monthly. By 1988, its enrollment was less than 850, having dropped more than 400 over the previous decade. The district had no special education courses, no gifted program, no vocal music or drama, no swimming pool, and no tennis courts. Only a few years earlier, its superintendent had predicted that the cash-poor district would have to be consolidated with another school district by the end of the decade. "To suggest that the level of teaching in Plain Local is superior to Columbus is a joke," said Columbus board member and
developer Robert Weiler. "But the difference is, when kids go to school in Plain Local, they’re going to school with predominantly white children. There’s that deep-rooted prejudice that still exists today, that ‘I as a white family want my kids to go to school with white kids.’ I can’t be any more blunt about it, or, hopefully, honest about it." While the controversy was as much about control as anything else—the public-education equivalent of a corporate takeover—the racial implications of Wexley were indeed inescapable: post-Hyre, post-Win-Win, the integrated Columbus Public School District was still considered an unacceptable risk for developers and an unsuitable education for the children of city leaders.

The Wexley battle placed the city-school growth conflict in painfully stark relief. For the first time, city leaders began viewing the Columbus school district as a malignant cancer rather than a benign blemish, a worsening urban disease that could be fatal in the long run if left untreated. Civic boosters already preparing for Columbus’s 1992 coming-out party—the quincentennial anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s voyage—feared that a sickly school system could prove contagious, spoiling the image of the city itself. An added degree of urgency was injected by the gradually growing proportion of black students in the district: 46.3 percent in 1988–89. For a business community long devoted to the perception of a quality urban school system, a majority black enrollment symbolized educational unsalvageability, a “tipping point” beyond which urban chaos lurked. “There’s the perception,” said James Kunde, an urban leadership consultant who had worked closely with Columbus’s business elite, “that if [the school district] gets over 50 percent black, you’ve lost it. Rather than ‘we can still do high quality with a mostly black school’ . . . it falls off the edge of a cliff.” “Once it gets past 50, 51 percent,” concurred Urban League executive director Sam Gresham, the business community believes “the whole school system has tipped and it’s going to hell.”

The Wexley controversy thus stepped up the intensity with which school board members, city officials, and business leaders sought to lure middle-class whites back to the district. The agenda that emerged went beyond the end of busing to embrace a whole-
sale, corporate-style restructuring of the school system: find a strong "CEO" and resolute board willing to make difficult changes, downsize bloated middle management in order to enhance organizational responsiveness and redirect resources to the building level, and inspire educational innovation by granting teachers and principals more instructional independence. In snowballing sequence, however, each item on the agenda went drastically awry.

The school board election of 1987 was a model of Columbus growth consensus politics. The campaign promised to be wide open and unpredictable, with thirteen candidates running for five seats. It was, city leaders concluded, an uncertain situation that warranted unprecedented intervention. The result was "The Coalition for an Effective School Board," a singular alliance consisting of the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce, Columbus Education Association, and the Franklin County Democratic and Republican parties. Given the resources and clout that these groups represented, the election was decided the day the coalition endorsed its five-candidate slate: incumbents Rich Fahey, Robert Weiler, and Pauline Radebaugh, and newcomers Anne Hall and Sharlene Morgan.

Critically, however, the coalition's slate consisted not of specifically handpicked individuals but of previously declared candidates. As a result, after the election, the stabilizing, moderate consensus the coalition's endorsements were designed to create never materialized. What quickly emerged instead was a balkanized, squabbling, ineffective board, "a three-ring circus," as Weiler called it. Absent the strong hand of a James Hyre, the fractious, meddlesome board became a political laughingstock. "My favorite story," quipped Harrison Smith, "was the vote on a major issue which the Columbus school board opposed one to one to one to one to one to one to one to one."

The board's first major undertaking—the hiring of a new superintendent—proved a fiasco. After a failed initial search, it ran a secret CEO headhunt, eventually settling on Savannah, Georgia, superintendent Ron Etheridge, who had not even made the original list of finalists and received only a bare majority of votes in the board's
private caucus. Before the surprise press conference that sprang the new superintendent on the city, one reporter commented, "Whoever this turns out to be, he could be Jesus Christ and he'd be walking into a bad situation." By his resignation in late 1990, some indeed viewed Etheridge as a martyred messiah; to too many others, however, he had become the most demonized figure in the recent history of the Columbus schools.

The board gave Etheridge two charges: reorganize and reduce the district's central office administration, and reform and strengthen its educational program. Aloof, abrasive, and blunt, he proved temperamentally unsuited to the delicate politics of cutting high-level staff. By bringing an ax rather than a scalpel to the process, Etheridge decimated both central office and building-level morale. His leadership, employees came to believe, rested on henchmen, hitmen, and spies. Administrative trust subsequently plummeted, stifling rather than unleashing educational innovation and infusing even the most basic district operations with suspicion.

Moreover, Etheridge made the mistake of targeting several of the system's highest-ranking black administrators for termination. Columbus African Americans, already innately suspicious of a white southerner brought in to "reform" the city school system, exploded when Etheridge's first victims included community pillars such as assistant superintendent Evelyn Luckey. The furor that ensued became Columbus's most extended and intense African American protest in a generation, producing a successful black-led campaign to defeat the district's 1990 levy effort.

Black opposition also undermined Etheridge's ambitious but untested educational reform initiatives. Under James Hyre, the district's efforts to increase business community involvement and attract middle-class white homeowners had received the tacit support of the black community because they were constrained by two tethers: a sufficient degree of trust in the straightforward superintendent and the sense of security provided by the watchful eye of district court judge Robert Duncan. Neither qualification existed under Etheridge, however. As a result, the hostility provoked by
his administrative moves spilled over onto his educational reforms. Attacking Etheridge's ideas as a covert effort to resegregate the schools, African American leaders criticized the superintendent for being more concerned with attracting suburban whites than educating urban blacks. Many blacks viewed the business community's enthusiastic support of Etheridge as further proof that the Norfolk, Virginia, native had been brought in to weaken African American influence over the school system, eliminate busing, and return the district to a pre-Penick state of internal educational disparity.

In November 1990, following a divisive levy loss, Etheridge announced that he would be leaving Columbus to become superintendent of the Santa Barbara, California, school system. His acrimonious tenure had ensured the indefinite postponement of needed educational and administrative reforms, leaving "ending busing" as the only remaining miracle cure for the district's ills. In early 1990, the board had retained Robert Duncan, then in private practice with the firm of Jones, Day, Reavis, and Pogue, to advise the district on the legal ramifications of altering its student assignment plan. The former judge recommended that a citizens' committee be set up as a buffer against accusations of intentional resegregation. Former board president Carole Williams and departed city council president Jerry Hammond, an integrated team of influential local decision makers, accepted the board's invitations to head the potentially incendiary committee. The timing for such an effort appeared especially fortuitous, as an increasing number of local black leaders had begun expressing disenchantment with the school district's voluntary commitment to court-ordered desegregation mandates. During that fall's mayoral campaign, black Democratic city councilman Ben Espy had called repeatedly for "an end to busing," outflanking and nearly upsetting his heavily favored white Republican opponent, Greg Lashutka. "Over time, crosstown busing has only fostered the very alienation and segregation it was designed to eliminate," Espy declared. "We're busing for racial balance, but in cities like Philadelphia and Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago, one day they looked up and found out there were no more races to balance. So if [we]
don’t want to get to that point, we must be candid about what busing is doing to our economic base.” Had Espy won, he would have joined a growing number of black, big-city mayors committed to ending busing in order to reinvigorate urban development and re-channel educational resources.

On December 10, 1991, after a year of research, meetings, and debate, the Citizens’ Committee for Improved Student Assignment unveiled its recommendations. Decreasing the time and distance of bus rides and maintaining racial diversity were incompatible goals, Hammond and Williams told the board. If the district wanted to reduce busing, they advised, it should do so carefully, avoiding the politically loaded and demographically outdated phrase “neighborhood schools” and expanding integrative options to counter increased racial isolation. Most important, the committee’s report forewarned, “The mere assignment of students does not create an excellent school system. Improved image, increased enrollment, and return of the middle class to the Columbus Public Schools cannot be generated simply by a student assignment plan, unless the board of education, at the same time, addresses all relevant issues of quality and equity.”

The committee’s cautious counsel was not what the school board wanted to hear. After thanking Hammond and Williams for a year of hard work, the board unceremoniously jettisoned their recommendations. Rearranging the committee’s proposed guidelines, the board directed a team of administrators to construct a new assignment plan using “choice” and—despite the committee’s warnings—“neighborhood schools” as its top two priorities. Over the next several months, planners repeatedly tried to impress upon board members the controversy that such massive change and substantial resegregation would engender. But because so little trust remained between frustrated administrators and a micromanaging board, their message fell on deaf ears. Goaded by business leaders hoping that a return to neighborhood schools would bring residential development back to the district, the board ordered its planning team to press ahead with formulating a proposal.
Finally released on September 8, 1992, the long-awaited student reassignment plan accomplished exactly what the board had demanded, opening up more alternative-school slots and allowing 8,300 more students to walk to school. In doing so, however, the proposal reassigned 45 percent of the district’s 64,000 students, reduced the number of racially balanced schools from 113 to 60, and chucked at least one particularly explosive change into practically every section of the city. Predictably, opponents appeared en masse at a series of public meetings designed to gauge reaction to the plan, while satisfied supporters stayed home. Parents and students who may otherwise have backed its goals demanded that they be exempt from its dislocations. Black parents and community leaders in particular rejected the plan as precisely the kind of “reassignment for the sake of reassignment” gambit against which Hammond and Williams had warned, a developer-driven effort to end busing first and address education later, if at all. An unspecified “educational component” added belatedly to the plan did little to dispel criticisms of its inequitability. “When you have $3 for books, you know who’s going to get the $2 part,” explained Call and Post business editor and Hammond-Williams committee member Paul Anderson.

Public backlash brought a hasty retreat from the weak and fractious board, despite Columbus Dispatch calls not to “drop [the plan] over the side of the ship as soon as some big waves appear.” Finally, on November 16, interim superintendent Larry Mixon—the district’s fifth new leader in five years—drew a thirty-second ovation from a packed board meeting by “strongly recommend[ing] that a halt be called to the continued development of the student reassignment plan.” The board’s 5–2 vote to declare the plan “unacceptable” marked the ignominious defeat of the district’s most concerted attempt to abandon its voluntary commitment to the principles of Penick.

The student reassignment disaster vividly illustrated the quandary the school district had come to face. City leaders, both black and white, recognized that the implications of “busing” had to be erased before residential development—and, consequently, the re-
sources of the middle class—could be lured back to the Columbus schools. Yet the emphasis on dismantling desegregation obscured the fact that a generation of students had passed since 1979. To most of the district’s constituents, systemwide change was more intrusive than a transportation plan that had become the status quo. Consequently, any attempt to tinker with student assignments in a way significant enough to attract parents from outside the system inevitably would generate angry resistance from parents inside the system. Moreover, “busing for racial balance” could not be eliminated without producing substantial resegregation. The city schools thus faced an apparently intractable dilemma: get rid of busing and immediately create marked intradistrict educational disparities, or maintain the status quo and allow interdistrict educational disparities inexorably to worsen.

Political and policy-making debacles were not the only waves to rock the Columbus schools in the years after Jim Hyre’s departure. Social and economic forces combined to accelerate the deterioration of the school system, further complicating efforts to reinvigorate urban education in Columbus.

Long defined by its stable, balanced economy, Ohio’s capital has always remained relatively insulated from the cyclical downturns that plague most other cities. The recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, revealed that not even Columbus could escape the wrenching structural changes occurring in the nation’s economy. Disappearing was the backbone of America’s postwar prosperity—low-tech, high-wage, high-security manufacturing jobs—the victim of improved transportation technology, globalized labor markets, computerization, and borderless capital. Emerging in its place was a service-based economy characterized by an increasingly bifurcated wage structure, a labor market in which the capacity to produce or process information was becoming the most significant determinant of an individual’s prospects. Thus, while blue-collar labor declined as an available outlet for the uneducated, the economic significance of learning grew.
Though central Ohio has never been dependent on industry for its prosperity, manufacturing jobs have always made up a prominent portion of the area's labor base. Over the past two decades, however, the relative significance of manufacturing has steadily declined. While total employment in the seven-county Columbus Metropolitan Statistical Area rose 59 percent from 1970 to 1989, manufacturing employment fell 10 percent. The goods-producing jobs that supplied 31.4 percent of the area's employment in 1970 provided only 19.2 percent of its jobs in 1989. This decline is particularly important because the average annual wage of a goods-producing job in the Columbus area was, as of 1989, 38 percent higher than that of the typical service-sector position.

The negative effects of these changes fell first on unskilled, poor and minority central-city residents. As a result, the giddy mid-1980s boom that seemed to be symbolized by the sparkling skyscrapers rising downtown was actually better captured by the division of labor hidden within: the disparity between those who worked in the spacious offices during the day and those who cleaned them at night. In 1990, for instance, the Columbus school district contained 70 percent of the city's residents, but 91.4 percent of those living in poverty. While the 1990 poverty rate for those living within the city school boundaries stood at 19.9 percent, the poverty rate for the common areas was only 5.7 percent. Other statistics provide a similar picture of economic divergence along racial and geographical lines: the unemployment rate within the city school district was 6.9 percent in 1990, but only 3.1 percent in the common areas. In 1988, the average household income in older, central-city Columbus was $22,432, compared to $35,336 in the rest of the county; and the per capita income of whites in Franklin County in 1990 was 42.6 percent higher than that of African Americans.

In *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton convincingly demonstrate that “black poverty is exacerbated, reinforced, and perpetuated by racial segregation.” Though tempered by central Ohio's relative prosperity, their assessment is certainly applicable to Columbus,
and the process they describe was intensified during the past decade by economic dislocation, crack cocaine, and violent crime. These dynamics have affected the entire region to some degree, but they have hit black youth—and, in turn, the Columbus Public Schools—with disproportionate force. The result: a combination of multiplying out-of-school risk factors and declining in-school discipline that throws barrier after barrier in the way of academic progress. "Most poverty-family children, regardless of race," an in-house chamber of commerce report observed, "enter the educational system with severe disadvantages—poor diets, little home encouragement to learn, exposure to crime and drugs, often from single-parent homes, peer pressures. Those who succeed in the face of these odds are truly exceptional."  

Though the Columbus Public Schools contained pockets of excellence, the cycle of poverty and violence that existed reinforced the continuing exodus of middle-class resources from the district. According to a Columbus Development Department report, the value of residential real property in the common areas grew 330 percent during the 1980s, compared to just 73 percent in the city district; between 1980 and 1989, the Columbus schools' share of the city's residential property value declined from 84.4 percent to 68.5 percent. Indeed, by the beginning of the 1990s, it had become all too apparent that the new residential development that James Hyre hoped would follow the Win-Win Agreement was not going to materialize. In 1989, for example, only 2 percent of the single-family building permits issued in Franklin County were for homes in the city school district; the city itself, on the other hand, captured 51 percent of these permits. Of 185 housing developments under construction in the county that year, just three were served by the Columbus district. Through 1991, the spoils of Win-Win included only 23 students and 2,865 acres.

Business investment, meanwhile, followed residential growth beyond the Columbus school system's borders. From 1980 to 1989, the taxable value of personal property in the city school district declined 16.2 percent in real terms. During that time, the proportion
of personal property value located in the common areas nearly doubled, growing from 16.6 percent of the city's total to 31.9 percent. Businesses were drawn to the common areas despite the higher tax rates of suburban school systems. "The attractions," explained a Columbus Development Department report, "include growing and relatively affluent populations, well educated labor forces, more abundant and lower priced land for development, and the various amenities typically perceived as suburban."  

While the Columbus schools are in adequate shape physically and fiscally compared to some other urban systems, the gradual hemorrhaging of resources from the district will eventually take its toll. If current conditions continue, the school district can, at best, struggle to tread water. At worst, it will slowly sink.

Columbus's business leadership has come to view the declining health of the city school district with growing alarm. Ever since the Win-Win Agreement reconnected municipal annexation and school territory transfer, the city's growth has suffered. In 1984, 68 percent of all land annexed to Columbus was for single-family homes; from 1986 to 1990, the figure dropped to 3 percent. An equally pressing worry has become the effect of the district's educational standards on the quality of the area's workforce. "An increasing share of Columbus's young people do not graduate from high school and a growing share of those who do graduate lack the reading, writing, computing, and communicating skills to qualify even for an entry level office or factory job," asserted a recent chamber of commerce report. With city leaders seeking to position Columbus as a new kind of high-tech, inland information hub, improving the productivity and employability of city school graduates has emerged as an economic imperative. "Columbus is not only competing with San Diego, Indianapolis and other cities," wrote Midland Mutual CEO and 1990 chamber chair Gerald Mayo, one of the business community's most respected school advocates, "but with cities in other countries with educated labor forces. If our workers are not as skilled, then we cannot compete. The economic growth of this community is dependent on the education of our children, because good
schools attract new companies, new jobs, and provide us with skilled workers to fill those jobs." An ailing city school system, on the other hand, produces not just an uncompetitive labor force, but a host of expensive social ills that mar the city's image and damage its quality of life. Where preserving the perception of a good urban district once seemed such a luxury, creating the reality of such a system has now come to be viewed as a necessity by many Columbus business leaders. "Failure to correct current [educational] deficiencies, especially in the Columbus City Schools," warned the chamber's economic development strategy report, "will cripple the Columbus area economy within the next ten years." While the report noted that "the problems are still solvable," it added, "To mobilize support for a massive effort to address this full range of problems, the education challenge must be viewed as more than a social issue. It is, in fact, a problem that can bring the Columbus area's economic growth to a standstill, eventually producing the kind of stagnation now found in larger urban areas (e.g. New York and Detroit). Because it is also a 'survival' issue for Columbus's business community, it merits the same level of attention and commitment that business leaders give to other challenges that threaten their profitability." 43

But just what form could such a "massive effort" take? Who would provide the leadership? And where would the resources come from? Unable to assume a satisfactory degree of predictability and control, skittish Columbus business leaders have shied away from any high-visibility investment in the city school district. For despite the chamber's dire warnings, no immediate civic catastrophe looms, no economic emergency seems imminent. Absent some sudden and dramatic disaster, no easy symbolism exists to spark a crusade to revitalize the city schools. Moreover, given the school system's fragmented constituencies, trip-wire political sensitivity, and countless competing interest groups, there is little evidence of an emerging reform consensus in Columbus. Old approaches have failed to ensure equal educational opportunity, and compelling new ones have not yet arisen to replace them. As a result of the unbridgeable chasm
between what is necessary and what is possible, a sense of policymaking paralysis has come to surround the Columbus schools. With this bleak picture in mind, and as a way of revisiting some of the main themes of this book, I conclude with a hypothetical policy proposal whose centerpiece is at once elementary and revolutionary: the abolition of the Columbus Public School District.

Conclusion

In the four decades since Brown v. Board of Education, the law of the land has been neutralized by the law of unintended consequences. As the moral clarity of that decision has been blurred by the messy reality of its application, the prospect of fulfilling Brown’s promise has become increasingly remote, intimidating, and perhaps even hopeless. That we have failed to give full meaning to Brown, however, does not mean that we should cease to try. Inequality of opportunity remains the distinguishing characteristic of America’s public education system, and Chief Justice Earl Warren’s 1954 words are echoed in the rhetoric of end-of-the-century school reformers of all political stripes: “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” To reassert Brown’s aims, we must reassess its failures. The story of school desegregation in Columbus, Ohio, with all its complexity, controversy, drama, and banality, offers an instructive look at the barriers to and boundaries of efforts to ensure educational opportunity.

In telling this story, I chose to focus not on the courtroom or the classroom, but on the city itself and those who shape it. From the beginning, school desegregation was about the relationship between where children lived and where they went to school. In Columbus, as in most northern urban areas, public and private discrimination
worked symbiotically to concentrate almost all of the area's African American population in a small section of the central city served by a handful of all-black schools. When years of frustration and protest failed to shatter segregative practices, blacks were forced to seek redress in the courts and, eventually, remedy in busing. Columbus's powerful business community worked aggressively to ensure that the implementation of Judge Robert Duncan's desegregation order in the Penick case proceeded peacefully, without the kind of headline-grabbing violence that could have hindered the city's promising economic prospects. All the while, however, private- and public-sector actions were combining to decouple the state of the city from the status of its school system; the business-led "growth consensus" that governs civic affairs in Columbus both knowingly permitted and actively encouraged a jurisdictional peculiarity that allows 40 percent of Columbus to be situated in suburban school districts. These "common areas" have acted as a middle-class safety valve, enabling the city to prosper even as the city schools have come to serve a rising proportion of poor white and black students.

Busing as a constitutional remedy was designed to render irrelevant the relationship between housing and school attendance patterns. While the courts could control pupil assignments, however, they had no jurisdiction over the local residential development market. Those in Columbus most responsible for shaping the city's living patterns—politicians, bankers, builders, developers, real estate agents, and others—were complicit in but not accountable for the creation and perpetuation of segregated schools. Far more fluid and adaptable than the race-conscious judicial system's halting, unwieldy remedy process, the equally race-conscious private market was quickly able to anticipate, evade, and ultimately profit from Penick's outcome. By the time desegregation was implemented, the border of the Columbus Public School District had been tacitly designated a residential development redline, within which virtually no single-family home building would take place.

As with all affirmative action remedies, planned obsolescence was essential to busing's legitimacy. Its advocates believed that
because segregated schools helped produce and solidify segregated residential patterns, therefore desegregated schools would eventually spur integrated housing, in turn making desegregation unnecessary. But busing had two unforeseen effects: it exacerbated rather than reduced the impact of race and racial fear as housing market variables, and it severed rather than transformed the relationship between city schools and single-family home building. Since new houses for central Ohio’s growing population were available only in suburban school systems, the city school district slowly lost the critical mass of middle-class families necessary to desegregation’s success. Perhaps even more important than the property tax revenues and extracurricular funds that followed these families was the hemorrhaging of social capital, the less quantifiable resources—employment opportunities, access to stores and services, new infrastructure, political energy, social stability—that generally accompany middle-class residential development and ensure a community environment more conducive to the education of children. It was access to these resources that school desegregation sought ultimately to equalize. Overcoming their inequitable distribution seemed feasible as long as they were concentrated within the same jurisdiction. By driving the single-family housing market beyond the boundaries of the city school district, however, busing inadvertently fragmented these resources and thereby made gaining access to them even more complicated and elusive than before.

While desegregation in Columbus has by no means been the disaster its opponents predicted, it has plainly failed to ensure equal educational opportunity for all children. Inequities that existed between individual schools a generation ago persist, only now they are defined on a broader scale by urban-suburban school district borders. Meanwhile, the backlash against busing has largely chilled any discussion about the interaction of race, class, residential patterns, and educational opportunity. Whites and blacks alike have grown weary of the sacrifices demanded by integration and dubious of its presumed benefits. With government-supported desegregation efforts in retreat, current attempts to reinvigorate urban education simply assume the inevitability of economic and racial isolation.
Critics of public education often argue that its problems start in the home, yet most categories of reform—funding, administration, choice—focus solely on the schools. While new approaches to these areas are necessary, they are also insufficient. The development of most children is shaped by the interplay of home, school, and neighborhood environments. The more unsafe, unpredictable, or impoverished any of these elements is, the more complicated the path from infancy to productive citizenship becomes. Efforts to address the particular problems of urban education (in short, the difficulty of educating large concentrations of poor, often minority children) must therefore do more than increase access to good schools; they must also strengthen what writer Richard Weissbourd calls the "scaffolding" that shapes healthy development.45

In practical terms, such efforts demand policies that seek to reduce economic isolation while increasing access to educational opportunities. Combining these considerations with the lessons learned from the history of Columbus school desegregation, I have come up with a hypothetical proposal that usefully illustrates the complexity of the issues involved and the creativity needed to address them. While the specifics of this plan apply solely to Columbus, the dilemmas that shape it are familiar to urban school districts around the country: the complicated interplay of economic growth, housing development, and educational opportunity; the ambivalent attitudes of whites and blacks toward integration; the impact of the private market on public education and the often conflicting role of business leaders in addressing public education's problems; and the need to reduce concentrations of poverty in order to expand access to educational resources.

The three elements of the plan are as follows:

1. Eliminate the Columbus Public School District and extend the boundaries of Franklin County's suburban systems to cover the territory currently served by Columbus.

The Columbus Public School District is neither the best nor the worst urban system in America. It contains some fine schools, numerous
innovative programs, and many superb, devoted educators. Yet the
district is trapped in a catch-22 that makes it less and less able to
keep pace with the accelerating demands of a rapidly changing,
knowledge- and information-based society: called on to educate a
growing proportion of poor or near-poor children, the district itself
has become a barrier to the resources demanded by the task. The
consequence of these mutually reinforcing conditions is, if not inex­
orable decline, at least increased educational inadequacy. What fol­
lows is therefore not a repudiation of the city school system itself,
but a condemnation of the structures that have allowed the current
situation to develop.

The first step of this proposal is the elimination of the Columbus
Public School District. As the expansion of the common areas over
the past three decades demonstrates, it is the city school system,
not the city itself, that the middle class has come to reject. If urban
school boundaries have become such powerful walls, why not tear
them down? It would be the opposite of both annexation and metro­
politanization: instead of extending the city district’s borders, the
boundaries of Franklin County’s fifteen suburban systems would be
redrawn to cover the territory currently served by Columbus schools,
a geographically feasible process given the county’s unusual combi­
nation of suburbs and inburbs. City students would then be distrib­
uted among suburban systems in such a way as to ensure that no
district becomes identifiable as predominantly poor or minority.

By erasing the status distinction that city-suburban school bound­
daries symbolize, abolishing the Columbus schools would eliminate
the barrier to urban development that the district now represents.
Middle-class families would have no central city school system to
avoid or escape, public education would no longer stand as an ob­
stacle to Columbus’s annexation efforts, and the economic fruits of
metropolitan growth would be more broadly accessible. At the same
time, the preservation of existing suburban districts and the absence
of “forced busing” would mute suburban fears, speak to the sub­
urbs’ powerful sense of jurisdictional defensiveness, and address the
residential development-education nexus more effectively than ei­
ther metropolitanization or a Columbus school territory grab.
2. Create an “experimental education district” within the old boundaries of the Columbus Public School System.

Though simply doing away with the Columbus school district would break down the existing urban-suburban educational dichotomy, it would do little to make the central city more attractive to middle-class families and much to exacerbate African American concerns about cultural preservation and white educational indifference. The second part of this policy proposal would tackle these issues while rallying business community support for urban education.

The aim of creating an “experimental education district” would be to establish a concentrated hub of educational innovation within the old borders of the city school system. A half-elected, half-mayorally appointed board would oversee the establishment of choice-driven charter schools developed by a variety of sources: local community groups, enterprising parents and teachers, private educational consultants, area corporations, universities, and others. To provide an incentive for urban development, access would be restricted to students living within the old Columbus school boundaries; middle-class families would thus have to settle in the central city to avail themselves of particularly successful experiments. For Columbus’s business elite, meanwhile, the idea of an “experimental education zone” would be attractive not only because it would appeal to the private sector’s growing involvement in public education, but also because it would hold the potential to transform central Ohio into a national showcase of educational reform, exactly the kind of investment-attracting publicity city leaders covet.

Just as important, such a setup could accommodate the complexities of the black community much more effectively than mandatory desegregation did. For over a century, African Americans in Columbus have viewed integrated education with ambivalence, seeing it as the sacrifice of instructional control to indifferent, often hostile whites in return for access to the greater resources of the dominant majority. Penick represented the faith of many that this trade-off would be both favorable and temporary. A generation later, this faith seems tarnished, if not altogether discredited. At the same
time, however, a significant black middle class has emerged, further complicating the integration debate by magnifying the significance of economic status and introducing the issue of "black flight."

The result is a diverse, sometimes contradictory set of interests that demands more options and more autonomy than desegregation allowed. This proposal would provide both, offering black parents greater freedom to tailor the educational environments of their children. Through existing choice programs, students could either remain in their current schools or transfer to other schools in their newly drawn districts. The opportunities for central-city students would be further multiplied by the alternatives available in the experimental education zone. A lab school developed and run by Ohio State, an Africentric school, a high-tech trade school supported by a consortium of local companies, an all-male academy emphasizing discipline and basics—these are just some of the possibilities. By vastly expanding African American educational options while neither abandoning nor demanding integration, this plan would de-emphasize the dilemma that desegregation has so long stressed, reducing racial balance to just one in a series of factors to be weighed and prioritized by black parents.

3. Use Columbus's water and sewer service monopoly to encourage the development of mixed-income housing.

The first two elements of this policy proposal were designed primarily to reduce economic isolation and increase educational opportunity in the central city. Most new development in Franklin County, however, will continue to spread outward from the fringes of Columbus and its suburbs. The construction of mixed-income housing is thus necessary to begin to disrupt the patterns of isolation that these areas have traditionally reinforced. Unless such construction is encouraged, Columbus will continue to bear the growing burden of providing services and shelter to the overwhelming majority of the region's poor population.
Municipal fragmentation multiplies both the difficulty and the importance of promoting mixed-income housing. Suburban jurisdictions ensure desirability through zoning restrictions over which Columbus has no control. Unilateral attempts by Columbus to alter its own housing patterns, meanwhile, are likely futile: economic incentives for developers are costly and controversial; additional regulations would only serve to drive new development out of the city. Absent the creation of some sort of metropolitan governing body with authority over development decisions, Columbus is left with only one lever of any consequence: its near-countywide monopoly over water and sewer services.

For four decades, Columbus has used its water and sewer monopoly to control suburban sprawl and preserve its ability to expand. It is to this powerful tool, then, that the city must turn to foster not just orderly growth, but equitable growth as well. Columbus should take a "carrot and stick" approach to renegotiating service contracts with surrounding suburbs, insisting on "fair share" housing agreements—targeted percentages of low- and moderate-income housing construction—in return for the expansion of service areas. Tap-in fees would be tied to each suburb's willingness to encourage more diverse residential patterns. Lower costs would thus provide an incentive for more mixed-income development, while higher costs would serve as a disincentive to economically exclusive development. Either way, the suburbs would be required to assume more responsibility for the social welfare of the whole region, whether by absorbing a larger share of the Columbus area's low-income population or by paying more for the consequences of concentrating poverty in the city.

There are, of course, many problems with this proposal, not the least of which is its political inconceivability. Its purpose, however, has not been to provide a practical blueprint for the reconstruction of urban education in Columbus. Rather, it has been to illustrate how the politics of place continues to affect educational opportunity, and to highlight the need to develop postdesegregation policies
to fulfill Brown's sagging but still-vital spirit. The aims of the plan—to reduce economic isolation while increasing educational options—are not themselves enough to cure the ills of urban education, in Columbus or elsewhere; at the same time, prescriptions that ignore these ingredients are doomed to fail.

On January 31, 1996, the Columbus Board of Education adopted a sweeping new student assignment scheme. Hailed as “an end to forced busing,” the board’s plan combined neighborhood schools with districtwide choice, terminating more than ten years of voluntary adherence to district court desegregation criteria. “This is not an end but a beginning,” declared Rhonda Whitlow, president of the Columbus chapter of the NAACP, which supported the plan. By finally banishing the bogeyman busing had become, the board swept aside what was at once one of the school system’s most entrenched distractions and one of its most convenient scapegoats. Columbus, the country, and the world have all changed dramatically in the twenty years since Robert Duncan’s Penick ruling; if the death of desegregation allows for a more clearheaded conversation about the forces shaping city schools, then it may prove a sort of educational euthanasia. More likely than not, however, desegregation’s end, like the sudden collapse of the cold war, will only serve to expose the more complex, elusive, and intractable dilemmas that have developed in its shadows. Though Penick’s premise may no longer resonate, its promise does. And unless bold, boundary-breaking initiatives are undertaken to address the persistence of educational inequality in Columbus, the city school district will enter the twenty-first century without busing, simply spinning its wheels.