

Bridging the racial divide: All schools should have the tools they need

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Five decades ago, third-grader Linda Brown could not attend school in her racially integrated Topeka neighborhood; the law required her to take a bus across town to attend a dilapidated school designated for blacks. Linda's case and others like it prompted a series of lawsuits that eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court decided that schools set aside for blacks were not equal in quality to those designated for whites, and that the only remedy for this inequality was to ban racial discrimination in schools.

Last month another discrimination case made its way to the Supreme Court. In a 5-4 decision the court, invoking *Brown*, declared that white students in Seattle and Louisville were discriminated against when the school systems assigned them to schools solely on the basis of race—even though the assignment was part of a deliberate effort to keep the schools racially integrated for the purpose of providing equal education.

In 50 years, the claim of discrimination has been turned 180 degrees. The notion of equality under the law, once cited by the court to force integration, is now cited to ban forced integration. If integration is the key to equal black education, then the June ruling betrayed the principles of *Brown*.

But is racial integration of schools the key to black achievement? It's on this point that there is much less certainty now than there was in the 1950s.

To begin with, de facto racial segregation has made school integration a moot point in many places. Large sections of many big cities, for example, have so few whites that an integration plan is impractical. Meanwhile, polls have shown that many blacks are more interested in having good schools than in having integrated schools. Ted Shaw, president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, and a firm advocate of integration, acknowledged to the *Washington Post* (June 30) that many black parents no longer put much stock in the ideal of integration: "A lot of black

folks say, 'Give us the resources, give us the money, we're tired of chasing white folks, and we don't need integrated schools to have a good education.'"

Furthermore, after decades of experience at integrated schools, African Americans still score lower on almost every kind of standardized test. Many experts say the key to solving this persistent achievement gap is not integration but smaller class sizes, better teachers, stricter standards and higher expectations.

It's noteworthy that these are the educational themes being sounded by Barack Obama, the black leader with a realistic chance of becoming president. Obama even dared to recommend some form of merit pay for teachers in his recent appearance before the National Education Association.

The racial divide in American education is profound and troubling. But the evidence of the post-*Brown* years suggests that it will be bridged not by integration plans but by a dogged focus on incremental reforms and a commitment to giving all schools the funds and tools they need.