

2000

Book Review of Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development, and the Columbus Public Schools

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Repository Citation

Douglas, Davison M., "Book Review of Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development, and the Columbus Public Schools" (2000). *Popular Media*. 462.

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Getting Around Brown: Desegregation, Development, and the Columbus Public Schools. By Gregory S. Jacobs. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1998. xvi + 291p.; notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth; \$16.95 paper.)

More than forty years ago, the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, identified school segregation as the central cause of unequal educational opportunity for black schoolchildren in this country. After more than a decade of limited enforcement of the Court's 1954 decision, both the courts and the federal Office of Education began to vigorously enforce *Brown's* desegregation mandate. As a result, during the late 1960s and 1970s, racial isolation in America's schools appreciably declined.

In more recent years, however, America's urban schoolchildren have become increasingly racially separate. Despite this trend towards greater school segregation, public discourse about educational reform no longer focuses on the importance of racial mixing. What happened to the momentum for racially mixed schools?

Gregory S. Jacobs' excellent history of the desegregation of the Columbus, Ohio, schools makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate over whether school busing is the best method of addressing the poor educational outcomes of many

urban minority children. Although the results of school desegregation efforts have varied widely from city to city, thus suggesting the value of detailed local studies such as that produced by Jacobs, Columbus turns out to be a particularly interesting venue for examining some of the larger issues that have emerged from the long struggle to desegregate America's schools.

In March 1977, a federal district court judge found the Columbus schools to be unlawfully segregated and ordered the school board to devise a desegregation plan. Having learned the lesson of Boston with its tumultuous desegregation experience of a few years earlier, the Columbus business and educational community rallied to insure that the implementation of the Columbus desegregation plan would be peaceful and perceived as successful. Indeed, over the course of the next decade, Columbus would promote its city schools as strong and successfully integrated and use this image to further the city's economic development. In some ways, the desegregation of the Columbus schools was successful. Educational achievement levels rose. Conflict was relatively minimal. Innovative leadership produced new programs that seemed to work.

But underneath this perception of success were certain structural developments that substantially weakened the city's schools. School desegregation in Columbus triggered the flight of many middle-class families to the suburbs and the refusal of real estate interests to build new residential developments within the city school district. As Columbus experienced substantial economic growth during the 1980s, most of the city's newcomers settled in the suburban school districts. Moreover, as the city annexed large chunks of neighboring suburbs during the 1980s, the suburban school districts successfully resisted their inclusion in the city school district. Eventually, suburban school districts encompassed about 40 percent of the city of Columbus. As a result, by the late 1980s, the city school district strained under the weight of a large number of special needs students but with comparatively limited resources to educate them.

In this way, Columbus' desegregation experience bears similarities to that of many other urban school systems. Only those school districts large enough to encompass an entire metropolitan area such as in Tampa or Charlotte avoided the extensive white and middle-class flight that cities such as Columbus experienced during the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of school desegregation decrees. Indeed, as Jacobs notes, the inability of the city school district to expand its jurisdiction into suburban neighborhoods proved crucial to the ultimate success of school desegregation in Columbus.

Given the legal barriers to metropolitan desegregation plans, maintaining racial mixing in many urban school districts has become extremely difficult. As a result, in recent years, the conversation about equal educational opportunity has shifted from a focus on the redistribution of children to a redistribution of revenue. In 1996, Columbus joined many other American cities and abandoned its busing plan in favor of a return to neighborhood schools and thereby impliedly rejected the importance of racially mixed classrooms. But educational inequities remain. As Jacobs notes, "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" (p. 198).

Jacobs' story of the Columbus schools is a stark reminder of the difficulties of urban school desegregation. And his well-written, compelling narrative leaves us with this question: as we abandon our pursuit of racial mixing, what do we do now to insure adequate educational opportunities for urban children?