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ARTICLE

Reconsidering School Segregation

Contemporary Lessons from 1960s Protest against Separate and Unequal Schools

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Abstract

The racial segregation of schools is commonly cited as the foundational injustice of the U.S. education system and an ongoing impediment to educational equality. For liberal experts and reformers, school segregation is defined as a pattern of racially separate schools serving either White students or students of color. This paper argues that this prevailing understanding of the school segregation issue is intellectually inadequate and politically limiting. Drawing on a case study of Chicago's movement for racial educational justice in the 1960s, I show that this simple framing of the issue initially gained prominence as an alternative to the more radical and contextualized critique of urban school segregation articulated by local Black grassroots activists. In contrast with official liberal discourse and reform proposals, Black urban activists in the early 1960s challenged school segregation as a set of educational policies and practices that render schools both separate and unequal, locking Black students out of more privileged White schools and contributing to the uneven development of schools across the racial divide. By recovering this suppressed grassroots critique of urban school segregation, this paper calls for a broader theorization of contemporary school segregation as dynamic and relational rather than a static statistical pattern that simply compounds the existing concentration of disadvantage within segregated neighborhoods.

Keywords: Segregation; Integration; Black Radical Tradition; Racial Educational Inequality; Urban School Reform

Discussions of racism in U.S. public education, both past and present, regularly center the problem of school segregation. By segregation, we normally mean "the separation or setting apart of one group from others," specifically, in the context of U.S. education, the separation of students of color from White students (Ellen and Steil, 2019, p. 1). Schools serving students of color are more likely to feature high poverty rates and a host of related disadvantages that analysts blame for undermining student achievement and widening the racial achievement gap (Carbonaro et al., 2023; Kahlenberg 2012; Orfield et al., 2016; Reardon et al., 2022). Advocates of school integration credit court-ordered school desegregation reforms of the 1970s and 1980s with driving a marked reduction in the Black-White achievement gap, and researchers have found evidence linking these reforms to improved educational and life outcomes for Black students (Anstreicher et al.,

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2022; Johnson 2019; Saatcioglu 2010; Wells and Crain, 1994). For school integrationists, ending segregation through the racial and socio-economic diversification of schools is the single most direct and effective solution to the structural racial inequities that maintain the racial achievement gap, yet U.S. society has abandoned this project. As journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones (2015) argued, "…we have this thing that we know works, that the data shows works, that we know is best for kids. And we will not talk about it. And it's not even on the table."

This article contends that this prevailing liberal perspective on school segregation and integration is inadequate. By framing issues of race, schooling, and educational opportunity within the narrow rubric of demographic separation and mixing, this perspective stops short of an analysis of the diverse, evolving dynamics of school segregation that dictate the hierarchical relationship between racial groups. Historically, the term "segregation" refers to multiple, complex regimes of racial domination from Jim Crow segregation and South African Apartheid to ongoing forms of urban ghettoization. These regimes are never reducible to social and spatial separation. They entail relations of control, exploitation, and deprivation between separate groups or spaces as well as rules for intergroup interaction in shared spaces (McMillen 1990; Varady 2012; Wacquant 2011; Western 1996). The history of segregated education in the United States is no different. Separate schools for Black students and other marginalized racial groups have been maintained by explicit or implicit policies dictating their limited access to public resources and staff, top-down control, violent or exploitative treatment of students, and curricular programming that is diluted or culturally demeaning (Anderson 1988; Reyhner and Eder, 2017; Sojoyner 2016; Watkins 2001). Prevailing discourse on the problem of school segregation, however, focuses on indices of separation and the consequences of racial and socio-economic isolation at the expense of accounting for the evolving educational policies and practices that undermine racially secluded communities and exploit spatial inequalities. The dominant perspective on school segregation conflates separation with inequality, but absent an institutionalized relationship of subordination between racially separate schools, these separate spaces could function more effectively as a buffer against racial oppression rather than as an oppressive tool that compounds existing inequality (Du Bois 1935; Merry 2013; Rickford 2016).

This article draws on an analysis of struggles over the definition of the school segregation issue during the 1960s to show that the currently prevailing conception of the issue, enshrined in social scientific scholarship on racial educational inequity, initially emerged in opposition to Black grassroots activism, which articulated its own critique of segregated schooling. During this period, an elite doctrine of racial liberalism, famously articulated by the Supreme Court in its landmark 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling and by leading scholars like Gunnar Myrdal (2017), condemned the separation of Black and White students in separate schools. This emphasis on racial separation and mixing failed to resonate with popular Black concerns and the arguments of radical Black activists, many of whom, nonetheless, embraced the promise of school integration as a means to more structural institutional change (Bell 1976; Gregory 1998; Melamed 2011; Payne 2004; Todd-Breland 2018). Urban Black protest movements mobilized against school segregation during the early 1960s not because of a general preference for racial diversity but rather in response to a distinct grassroots critique of segregation as processual, relational, and contextual. Motivated by perceived neglect, deprivation, and mismanagement in their community schools, these activists viewed segregation as a process of stigmatization and resource hoarding that actively maintained the privilege of White community schools in relation to schools designated as racially segregated or in the process of becoming segregated due to White flight. This specifically urban postwar segregationist regime governed city school systems where the rapid growth of Black and Latino residents contributed to

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overcrowding and prompted ongoing demographic change and contestation at the periphery of existing racial ghettos.

Supporters of school integration today acknowledge material inequities between schools, but they tend to insist on the racial diversification of schools as the most urgent and efficacious strategy for upending historic inequities. My historical analysis of school integration discourse, however, reveals that this elite emphasis on racial mixing represents more than a question of political strategy or rhetorical emphasis. Discursive differences in the definition of segregation led to diverging approaches to desegregation reform and open clashes between school policymakers and Black activist groups. The latter did not immediately abandon their support for integration, but they vocally opposed the version of school integration promoted by school officials and supported by liberal elites. The official approach viewed any increase in racial mixing as a step toward racial equity whereas grassroots activists expected desegregation initiatives to respond directly to the institutionalized inequities produced by segregation. Without an explicit analysis of the processes by which segregationist policies produce inequality, integration initiatives risk reproducing racial inequities within diverse schools (Darby and Rury, 2018; Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014) while ignoring the educational needs of majority Black and Brown areas of the city (Rickford 2016; Rooks 2025).

This tension continues to exist among proponents of school integration, with some scholars arguing for an approach to integration that more actively incorporates resource redistribution and an emphasis on power over proximity (Johnson 2019; Kirkland 2021; Stanley 2015). The prevailing perspective in academic scholarship and policy literature, however, reflects a narrow definition of the school segregation issue that creates a political dichotomy between integrating schools and investing in schools serving communities of color. This dichotomy is unfortunate. The problem of segregation has always been about the planned underdevelopment of racially secluded community institutions. Any strategy that attempts to reverse entrenched racial-spatial inequity absent an institutional analysis of ghettoization—the ongoing production of politically marginalized racial groups deprived of the means of economic development and cultural self-definition—is doomed to fail (Marcuse 1997; Wacquant 1997). Contemporary grassroots movements fighting the widespread closure of public schools in Black urban communities are rooted in a critique of entrenched racial-spatial inequities in education policy (Buras 2015; Duncan-Shippy 2019; Ewing 2018; Nuamah 2022). This paper contends that the persisting scholarly preoccupation with the inherent economic and political disadvantages facing low-income Black and Brown community schools fails to capture the core concerns of ongoing Black grassroots struggles because it stops short of a processual, relational, and contextual analysis of the problem of school segregation.

The analysis below begins with an outline and critique of the prevailing scholarly discourse on school integration before engaging in a historical investigation of discourses on school segregation based on a case study of Chicago's fight against separate and unequal schools during the 1960s. Chicago's struggle against school segregation provides a uniquely useful case because of the scope and diversity of its Black residential areas, the high national profile of its clashes over school segregation (Delmont 2016; Orfield 1969), and the persisting relevance of the segregation issue for local Black activists throughout the mid-1960s, even after other cities' movements had pivoted away from the segregation/integration agenda altogether. I use a wide array of archival evidence to track disputes over school segregation and integration in the city in relation to three specific policy problems: school overcrowding, racially changing schools, and student busing.

With respect to each of these issues, the terms and tactics of Black activism clashed—either implicitly or in explicit policy disagreements—with official arguments for school integration. Activists rejected the idea that school overcrowding was merely a reflection of

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Black neighborhood demographics, arguing, instead, that it reflected a relationship of racial containment—implicitly racial attendance policies that mitigated the overflow of the city's growing Black student population into White neighborhood schools. Black activists reframed White flight and the growing number of segregated Black schools as a process driven by institutional factors rather than a natural tendency toward Black social instability and White self-segregation. Finally, they denied the inherent benefits of racial diversity by illustrating how official plans for busing students were inconsistent with the immediate needs of local students and schools. For these activists, the problem of segregation was always relational, processual, and rooted in the racial and educational challenges specific to their local context. Mounting an effective response to persisting racial and spatial inequities in education today requires that we, similarly, move our analysis of segregation beyond merely documenting the static statistical pattern of racial separation and the disadvantages inherent to marginalized school communities.

The Limits of Contemporary Discourse on School Segregation

In the past decade, progressive voices like journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and former Secretary of Education John King have advocated for school integration as the north star for equity-oriented education reform (Hannah-Jones 2015; Ujifusa 2016). Government reports continue to condemn the persistence of racially separate schools, a pattern that typically corresponds to racial segregation in housing (Owens 2020). The U.S. Government Accounting Office, for instance, documents the percentage of U.S. public schools that enroll more than 75% of students from a single racial or ethnic group (U.S. GAO 2022). An earlier report by the National Center for Education Statistics analyzed rates of "Black student density," describing the prevalence of majority Black schools and the negative impact that these schools have on Black student achievement (NAEP 2015). Researchers commonly use these statistical measures of school segregation to evaluate the progressive or regressive impact of new policy initiatives (Kotok et al., 2017; Marcotte and Dalane, 2019; Monarrez et al., 2022; Renzulli and Evans, 2005; Saporito 2003).

This preoccupation with statistical patterns of segregation reflects what I call school integrationism—the liberal doctrine that racially integrating students in school is a necessary and primary step toward achieving educational equity and reducing the racial achievement gap. School integrationists argue that integration is not only a moral and legal imperative but also a practical necessity for education reformers seeking to develop a public school system that serves all racial groups equally. Social science research on school segregation provides the foundation for this perspective by scrutinizing patterns of racial and class separation as they relate to the racial achievement gap (Condron et al., 2013; Kahlenberg 2012; Mickelson et al., 2021; Owens 2018; Reardon 2016; Reardon et al., 2022). Reardon and colleagues (2022), for instance, examine the national pattern of "racial economic segregation"—referring to the high poverty rates that occur primarily in schools serving all or almost all students of color—and estimate its impact on student achievement gains over an eleven-year period. They find that the predominance of poor students of color attending a school has a direct effect on overall student achievement in the school, and they argue that this effect is due to the relative inability of low-income schools to attract and retain quality teachers, access public and private resources, and benefit from parent involvement. From this perspective, racial integration is a necessary condition for equalizing access to the social capital and political clout of relatively affluent majority White schools.

Other analysts argue that exposing students to high-poverty, majority Black or Brown classmates has a negative socio-cultural influence on their academic performance whereas

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the integration of disadvantaged students of color into majority middle-class schools creates a positive academic influence without undermining the success of their more affluent classmates (Black 2012; Carbonaro et al., 2023; Hanushek et al., 2009). In addition to the individual educational disadvantages facing students from low-income families, a compounded collective disadvantage befalls students exposed to these segregated peer environments. This theory was first popularized by the U.S. Office of Education's 1966 national survey on educational inequality known as the Coleman Report, which was routinely cited to justify early school desegregation policies (Alexander and Morgan, 2016; Coleman et al., 1966; Kahlenberg 2001). This influential line of research exemplifies the analytic framing of school segregation as static and substantialist rather than processual and relational. It reduces segregation to statistical indices of racial separation while locating the educational harms of segregation in the substantive traits of the students and families who are segregated.

The cumulative disadvantage facing oppressed groups secluded in separate schools and neighborhoods is well-supported in the research literature, but this overarching emphasis on the inevitable disadvantages facing isolated racial groups distracts from the looming forces of seclusion and sabotage that actively make these separate schools unequal. Although schools serving communities of color do suffer from the burdens of concentrated poverty and political marginalization (Anyon 1997; Noguera 2003; Rothstein 2004), they also face more pointed social and institutional pressures that undermine their potential to cope with these burdens through racial solidarity and mutual support. Integrationist discourse too easily overlooks the possibility that separate schools might serve as a buffer against the broader harms of structural racism, framing them merely as incubators of "disadvantage," reified as an attribute of those who are disadvantaged. For African Americans, in particular, public schools have historically represented a potential site for community-making and cultural reinforcement in the face of a hostile world (Rickford 2016; Siddle-Walker 2000). As W. E. B. Du Bois (1935) argued during the height of Jim Crow segregation, all-Black schools can provide the safety, understanding, and support that Black children need to prepare for a hostile, racist world. Framing segregation as a statistical pattern of separate schooling obscures the violent forms of "cultural enclosure" that continue to deprive separate Black schools of the autonomy and resources to effectively serve their cultural distinct and economically disadvantaged students (Aggarwal 2024; Sojoyner 2016).

Absent this broader accounting of the causes of separate and unequal education, efforts to promote racial equity through school integration fall short of their aims, often harming students of color and their broader communities in the process (Cecelski 2000; Erickson 2016; Horsford 2011; Peters 2019; Rooks 2025; Walker 2000). Of course, many Black students and other students of color have benefited from access to diverse and privileged educational spaces as a result of integration initiatives, but research documenting the benefits of school integration reform during the 1970s and 1980s has noted that these benefits occurred primarily in school districts where integration was enacted alongside school finance reforms and investment in early childhood education (Johnson 2019; also see Reber 2010). In many cases, urban school integration plans, even when they included provisions to support Black and Latino schools that remained segregated, failed to ameliorate the ongoing deprivation and deterioration of inner-city schools (e.g., Eaton et al., 1996). Across the country, Black students and schools often suffered collateral damage from integration. Many historically Black and Brown schools were closed or reconceived as citywide magnet schools, robbing local communities of an important neighborhood institution, and Black educators were fired by the thousands (Cecelski 2000; Dougherty 2004; Erickson 2016; Peters 2019; Rooks 2025; Walker 2000). For those students of color who gained access to integrated educational spaces, new challenges often awaited them.

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They faced the burden of social isolation and hostility, the reproduction of segregation across classrooms and curricular tracks, and other less apparent inequities in teaching and school administration (Darby and Rury, 2018; Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014; Lucas and Berends, 2007; O'Connor 2016; Posey-Maddox 2014; Rooks 2025; Tyson 2011).

The school integration efforts that began during the late 1960s ultimately failed to upend the racial-spatial inequities that continue to characterize much of U.S. public education. This failure was not merely due to the limited scope and persistence of these reforms. Integration reform failed because it was not based on an analysis of the processes that make schools both separate and unequal. By accounting for the policies and practices, past and present, that contribute to the neglect and instability of black and brown schools while privileging schools on the other side of the color line, the school integration agenda can better avoid reproducing racial hierarchies in apparently more diverse schools. Today's integration advocates generally do not deny that segregated schools suffer from institutionalized inequities. Unlike during the postwar era, liberal commentators are unlikely to explicitly cite deficiencies of African American culture or otherwise reduce the problem of segregation to a matter of social psychology. The prevailing rationale for integration, nonetheless, insists that educational inequality is the inevitable byproduct of racial and socio-economic separation. Scholarly arguments condemning segregated schools cite the cumulative burdens of poverty on Black and Brown students, and they suggest that these segregated communities lack the political and economic means to overcome the legacy of educational inequality. These points are not entirely incorrect, but they fail to confront the ongoing role of school policies that undermine the potential for school improvement and distribute resources toward relatively privileged educational spaces (Aggarwal 2024; Drake Rodgriguez 2023). As Black urban movements during the 1960s learned through first-hand experience, any integration agenda that bypasses a contextualized analysis of the institutional dynamics undermining Black and Brown schools is likely to leave these dynamics intact.

Chicago's Grassroots Struggle for School Integration

In several major cities across the U.S. North and West, the push for school integration reform during the 1960s developed around the mobilization of local Black activist groups and grassroots leaders who embraced school integration as a means to achieve decent public schooling for all (Danns 2003; Delmont 2016; Dougherty 2004; Taylor and Galamison, 2001; Todd-Breland 2018). While these Black urban movements would, by the late 1960s, largely pivot away from school integration in favor of governance reforms granting local communities power over their still-segregated neighborhood schools, clashes during the early to mid-1960s reveal grassroots movements that challenged school segregation based on an analysis that was more consistent with subsequent arguments for community control than with official integration proposals. By juxtaposing the language and tactics of Chicago's grassroots activists with liberal leaders and policymakers who supported integration, this study exposes the underlying tensions within the school integration agenda and the discursive pitfalls that continue to characterize integrationist discourse today.

The analysis that follows focuses on the community organizations and local leadership that helped found and lead the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO)—the umbrella organization for Chicago's citywide civil rights movement. This movement brought together local Black activists, local chapters of established nationwide civil rights groups, and various White-led religious groups, labor organizations, and reform advocacy groups (Anderson and Pickering, 1986; Danns 2003; Rury 1999; Shipps 2006; Todd-Breland 2018). I use the term "grassroots" to refer to homegrown Black community

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organizations, politically engaged voluntary assocations, rank-and-file protesters, and ad hoc activist groups as well as the movement leaders who emerged from them. In contrast, established civil rights organizations like the Chicago Urban League allied with these community-based groups but often relied on corporate elites for funding as well as the political support and influence of state elites. I focus on the three community organizations that helped found the CCCO—The Woodlawn Organization, the Englewood Council for Community Action, and the Chatham-Avalon Park Community Council (Anderson and Pickering, 1986)—as well as other community groups and leaders active on the Southside of the city. These communities were middle-income relative to the older Black residential areas located closer to downtown Chicago, but their political support for school integration did not reflect a specific focus on the interests of high-achieving, relatively privileged Black students seeking access to White schools. Instead, these communities mobilized in response to their firsthand experience with the ongoing process of school segregation in areas of the city recently settled by Black people. In these communities, located at the border between the large Southside ghetto and the White neighborhoods on the periphery of the city, the arrival of Black families living within or near historically White areas led to unintended racial mixing in previously all-White schools.

These schools and neighborhoods were the primary targets of various policy interventions ostensibly intended to manage student overcrowding, White flight, and the implementation of corresponding student busing plans. The growing number of school-aged youth of color in these areas drove school overcrowding and drove out White families, who fled their new Black classmates and the deteriorating educational standards of schools ill-equipped to serve them. City leaders supported school integration initiatives that could help manage racial mixing and appease White families who were otherwise likely to leave the school district (Shipps 2006; Steffes 2015). These school integration efforts, however, frustrated local Black parents and students who argued that the measures did not reflect a coherent understanding of the dynamics of school segregation or the potential educational benefits of school integration. Official integration efforts did not merely ignore the majority of Chicago's Black neighborhoods that did not border White neighborhoods, but they also ignored the longstanding educational policy failures that abandoned Black schools to internal disorganization and low academic standards. From the perspective of the Black grassroots critique of school segregation, this same neglectful posture was instrumental to the ongoing segregation of public schools in neighborhoods more recently settled by Black families. Activists linked racial separation to a segregationist policy regime that treated them as a burden on the system and neglected their demands for improved school resources and programming.

School Overcrowding and the Relational Dynamics of Racial Containment

The problem of intense school overcrowding was inextricable from the issue of urban school segregation during the postwar decades. For many Black Chicagoans, overcrowding in their neighborhood public schools made normal classroom instruction untenable, and they blamed the problem on an implicit policy of racial containment—the strategic placement of school buildings and school attendance boundaries to keep the city's growing Black student population from overflowing into White neighborhood schools. The Chicago Public Schools gradually acknowledged the statistical scope of the problem but never admitted that racially discriminatory policy decisions played a role in maintaining and exacerbating overcrowding. School officials and experts were committed to a substantialist interpretation of segregation that attributed school overcrowding to problems of crowding and racial segregation in residential neighborhoods—problems that were beyond the school system's control. They blamed the substantive features of the Black neighborhoods

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that these schools happened to serve rather than an exclusionary relationship between these Black neighborhood schools and surrounding White schools.

The Great Migration of African Americans out of the South and the related influx of young Black adults into Chicago set the stage for the conflict over school crowding. Student enrollment in the city school system increased from 400,000 in 1945 to a peak of 575,000 in the 1960s (Herrick 1971). While an ambitious school construction program during the 1950s alleviated much of the school overcrowding in White areas of the city, the crisis of overcrowding continued to intensify in schools serving Black students. At the start of the 1960s, three of the city's twenty school subdistricts experienced student-to-classroom ratios at least eight students above normal, and in each case these schools served segregated Black neighborhoods (Coons 1962). This level of overcrowding often compelled the city school district to operate these schools on a double-shift schedule, serving half its students in the morning and the other half later in the day. In 1960 the number of students attending schools on double-shift surpassed 33,000, a new high, and these students were almost entirely Black.

Early on, Black activists fought for accurate data on classroom utilization to expose the overcrowding problem (Coons 1962), but statistical documentation did not resolve underlying disputes about the causes of this racial injustice. As a concession to activist demands, the Chicago Board of Education commissioned the Advisory Panel on School Integration, an expert panel that produced a 1964 report on school segregation with tables documenting racial disparities in school overcrowding (Advisory Panel 1964). After settling a school segregation lawsuit and avoiding legal culpability for actively segregating students, the school board insisted, in its resolution establishing the independent Advisory Panel, that the widespread pattern of racially separate schools developed "without design on the part of the Board of Education or the school administration" (Advisory Panel 1964, p. vii). The Advisory Panel's report affirmed the Board's assertion that racially imbalanced enrollments across the city's schools was due to factors beyond the school system's control. The advisory report's statistical representation of aggregate levels of overcrowding confirmed general accusations of racial disparities in school conditions, but this depiction of the problem in tables and statistics failed to capture the scandalous nature of acute overcrowding and administrative ineptitude observed by Black parents and educators in specific areas of the city.

CCCO leader Al Raby filed a complaint to the U.S. Commissioner of Education during the summer of 1965 that summarized local accusations of racial containment.[1] In addition to gerrymandering school attendance boundaries, Raby described the tactical placement of new school buildings, branches, and mobile classroom units to absorb the growing number of Black students in certain areas as well as the spread of "upper grade centers" that often housed high school-aged teenagers in elementary school buildings rather than sending them to predominantly White high schools. School officials offered alternative, race-neutral rationale for these policy decisions and emphasized broader forces of migration and housing segregation as drivers of school overcrowding. Impacted Black parents and activists, however, routinely voiced the criticisms articulated by Raby.

An early clash on the far Southside over school overcrowding illustrates parents' perspectives of both the causes and effects of overcrowding. Complaints from parents at Burnside Elementary School during the 1961-1962 school year culminated in a sit-in protest that helped spark the emerging citywide movement (Anderson and Pickering, 1986; Coons 1962). The Burnside Parents Association's protest began with complaints that the provision of additional teachers and the conversion of library and art rooms into classrooms did little to overcome the severe disruption to classroom learning.[2] When the school board decided to transfer a group of Burnside students to another overcrowded, all-Black elementary school on the Southside, the parents staged a sit-in in the school building

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and issued a public statement demanding access to a nearby predominantly White school that had available classroom space.[3] From the perspective of local parents, administrative decisions to accommodate extreme overcrowding and shuffle Black students between segregated and under-resourced schools prioritized the preferences of White communities over the basic educational needs of Black students. They insisted that "if the schools in the surrounding area were allowed to spread out and absorb the overflow of students from adjacent areas in a *fair* and equitable manner then the crowded conditions existing within the 'core' would ease."[4]

Following the example of the Burnside parents, other Black neighborhood organizations and ad hoc parent groups mobilized to protest the school system's response to overcrowding, which, they argued, prioritized racial containment over meaningful solutions to the problem. In some cases, Black students were moved from crowded neighborhood schools into substandard facilities. In February of 1963, the Parent-Teacher Association at Betsy Ross Elementary School wrote the city school superintendent to protest the decision to transfer a group of third grade students to a new branch of the school located five blocks away in a sixteen-story public housing high-rise. The group complained that the space suffered from "a complete lack of educational facilities," including a single shared restroom, no drinking fountains, no phone, and no gym or safe place to play.[5]

The fight against school overcrowding culminated in citywide protests against the installment of mobile classroom units near crowded Black schools. Presented as a practical solution to alleviate overcrowding, these mobile classrooms, dubbed "Willis Wagons" in reference to Superintendent Benjamin Willis, were reframed by the local Black activists as an effort to keep Black students locked out of neighboring White communities. During the summers of 1962 and 1963, Black activists and allies organized to protest the installment of new mobile classroom units, often staging sit-ins and picket lines to block their installation (Danns 2003; Rury 1999; Todd-Breland 2018). On the surface, this resistance to mobile classrooms fits the common narrative of pro-integration activists rejecting any school improvement schemes, no matter how effective, if they left the pattern of racial separation intact. Black parents and community leaders, however, were skeptical that mobile classrooms would help manage the crowding issue or that they were even intended to do so (*Chicago Daily Tribune* 1962; Slaughter 1962). They viewed this intervention as simply another means of "hiding empty classrooms in white schools and treating Negro students like cattle," shuffling them between various overcrowded and makeshift segregated classrooms (*Chicago Daily Defender* 1962). Although Black migration into the city and persisting residential segregation created the conditions for severe school overcrowding, local Black activists focused on the relationship between Black and White schools, characterized by an unspoken policy of racial containment, as the most immediate cause of the problem. It was not an issue specific to Black areas of the city, and any good faith effort to solve it required confronting the citywide segregation of Chicago's schools.

Racially Changing Schools and the Process of School Destabilization

As the racial demographics of the postwar city changed, patterns of school and neighborhood segregation were in flux. The phenomenon of racial segregation, however, was commonly framed as a natural equilibrium or stasis, casting integration as fundamentally unstable and temporary. In Chicago and many other cities, growing Black populations gradually gained access to housing in formerly all-White areas, typically those adjacent to the Black ghetto, producing at least temporary racial mixing in select districts. The arrival of Black families in previously segregated city blocks impacted the racial makeup of neighborhood schools that otherwise tended to draw students from racially homogenous residential zones. For advocates of racial integration, this unplanned racial mixing was a

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sign of potential progress, but each newly integrated school or neighborhood was vulnerable to losing its White population and becoming a segregated Black area. This trend toward White flight and Black segregation was known as "destabilization," and school desegregation proposals in Chicago routinely focused on the challenge of preventing this destabilization by maintaining the demographic and social stability of integrated communities (Molotch 1972; Seligman 2005; Steffes 2015).

The term "destabilization" had multiple, sliding meanings. It simultaneously connoted instability in the form of rapid population change, the disruption of social order, and the onset of urban blight or school dysfunction. Discussions of school integration among White liberal reform advocates and school policymakers emphasized demographic instability, implying a tendency toward racial separation as a quasi-natural phenomenon. In line with many expert diagnoses of racial demographic change in residential areas (Duncan and Duncan, 1957; Wolf 1963; Wurdock 1981), these integration advocates presumed that integration was only possible when the percentage of Black students remained below a threshold or "tipping point" beyond which the Black presence would become intolerable to local White families and spur White flight from the area. The White public often assumed that the presence of Black classmates or neighbors would inevitably bring about the social and organizational deterioration of schools and neighborhoods, thus compelling White families to escape (Molotch 1972). An internal memo to the Executive Committee of the South Shore Commission, an influential neighborhood association representing the South Shore neighborhood's largely affluent and liberal White population, captured residents' implicit understanding of the destabilization issue. With respect to a racially changing section of South Shore adjacent to the all-Black Woodlawn neighborhood, the memo stated that "the psychology of this small four block deep section has permeated the entire area," referring to the social ripple effects of the arrival of "non-White families." It concluded that "the effect upon our entire community will be cumulative and may well be disastrous."[6] From this perspective, destabilization is the inevitable impact of newly arriving Black families who disrupt the social life of White communities, a process that the memo's author attributes to the prior destabilization of a nearby high school.

This popular White understanding of racial segregation suggested that segregation was a normal state, and racial integration, beyond a tolerable limit, threatened to destabilize the healthy White community and provoke both community decline and White flight. The inferior conditions of ghetto schools and neighborhoods were viewed as the natural byproduct of a concentrated Black presence, thus representing a similarly stable inverse to the healthy state of segregated White communities. From this perspective, "destabilization" specifically connotes the breakdown of *White* neighborhood and school norms. Black activists, in contrast, invoked the notion of school destabilization to describe an institutional process driven by factors external to the Black community. Not only did these activists reject the substantialist analysis of the effects of segregation as a byproduct of Black families and communities, but they also challenged the notion that destabilization was a momentary event impacting formerly all-White communities and resulting in a permanent of state of Black social disorganization. They viewed destabilization as an ongoing process of school mismanagement and decline that continued to afflict Black schools after the last White family had left as part of the ongoing production of racial spatial inequality.

From this perspective, confronting destabilization and the ongoing segregation of Chicago's schools required accounting for the specific challenges facing schools with a growing Black population—not attributing these challenges to the general cultural deficiencies of Black students. The arrival of Black students in a formerly all-White school often came with unique remedial educational needs, overcrowded classrooms, and racial conflict among students and educators (Neckerman 2008). The failure of schools and

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school policymakers to respond and adapt to these challenges was, for Black community members, the most important culprit in driving White flight, Black middle-class flight, and the decline of educational standards. Conversely, efforts to combat destabilization and maintain school and neighborhood integration should, from this perspective, start with practical educational improvements to the racially changing school. As a leader of the Chatham-Avalon Park Community Council (CAPCC) argued, "the problems of community stabilization and the character of its high school and educational quality are closely interrelated."[7]

In line with this perspective, the CAPCC proposed a school integration plan targeting a group of Southside high schools that would redesign each school to specialize in a specific academic area and reassign students in the region to high schools based on their academic interests rather than their residential location.[8] In contrast, the Citizens Schools Committee, a White-led pro-integration advocacy group, took for granted that predominantly Black schools were already lost to the forces of segregation. Its competing integration plan for Southside high schools offered the opportunity for a select number of high-achieving Black students to transfer into majority White schools.[9] Rather than insisting on school reforms to make racially mixed schools more attractive to White or affluent families, the prevailing approach to integration was based on the premise that any concentration of Black students, if too large, would inevitably spur White flight and the deterioration of the school and community. For the Citizens Schools Committee, integration required maintaining existing concentrations of White students by dispersing growing Black student populations so that these White students do not become the minority in their respective schools.

This underlying dispute came to the surface in the mid-1960s fight over the future of Hyde Park High School. Despite demands to stabilize the racially mixed school, Chicago Schools Superintendent Benjamin Willis determined that the school had already lost too many White students and would inevitably become completely segregated. A coalition of Black and White community associations and local leaders proposed converting their neighborhood high school into an educational park, which entailed rebuilding the old facility into a large campus serving students from a larger and more diverse geographic region of the city. Willis decided to address overcrowding at the school by building a smaller school in a more affluent and relatively diverse neighborhood nearby with the hope that the new school would be stably integrated.[10] Community voices defended the promise of their high school, insisting that it could, with more administrative support, retain remaining White students, attract more high-achieving students, and better serve its newer and still growing population of low-income Black students. One Black parent group specifically accused the school of failing to hire appropriate staff and adapt its curriculum and textbooks to the needs of its new Black student population, two-thirds of which were achieving below grade-level.[11] The superintendent's arguments about the infeasibility of maintaining racial integration in the majority Black school deflected from the educational considerations that animated local complaints. Frustrated with the district's ongoing preoccupation with demographics, the local organization leading the campaign to improve Hyde Park High School eventually dismissed integration proposals outright, insisting that the "overriding problem is not racial balance, nor is it any longer overcrowding. It is quality education for the 95% Negro student body!"[12]

Black residents in racially changing areas of the city openly challenged segregation and the destabilization of their schools, but they expected integration plans to stabilize the disorderly conditions of schools experiencing racial change. The standard narrative of integration, however, prioritized demographic balancing over the social dynamics and programmatic challenges of schools in racial transition. This official narrative associated the "destabilization" of these schools with the sudden flight of White families and treated

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the organizational challenges facing such schools as a side-effect rather than a driver of this demographic change. From the perspective of the Black grassroots critique, the problem was not a momentary trend of White flight but a persisting process of administrative mismanagement, organizational discord, and educational neglect impacting previously highly regarded White schools. For Black parents moving out of the historic ghetto, the initial destabilization of racially changing schools resembled the ongoing problems facing inner city schools that had been segregated for generations. As Alan Anderson and George Pickering (1986) described in their first-hand account of Chicago's Civil Rights Movement, "They did not see the deterioration of [racially changing] schools as temporary but as a repeat of what they were moving away from" (p. 86).

Student Busing and the Contextual Nature of School Segregation

When the Chicago Board of Education replaced Superintendent Willis with the more liberal James Redmond in 1966, it demonstrated its commitment to pursuing a more deliberate and expansive school integration agenda. A key pillar of this agenda was student busing, the transportation of students across racially divided neighborhoods to achieve racial balance. Generally, a school integration initiative might deploy any number of policy strategies, including changing racial attendance boundaries, building new schools, pairing existing schools, or establishing magnet schools and education parks that pull students from various neighborhoods. Busing, itself, could be deployed in service of different strategies, ranging from the enforcement of citywide racial quotas to selective opportunities for voluntary transfers between schools or school districts. In Chicago, desegregation plans typically involved the busing of Black students in racially changing areas to disperse them into surrounding White schools. Although this strategy might have satisfied local demands in select cases during the early 1960s, the concrete busing proposals presented in 1967 and 1968 provoked frustration and criticism from numerous Black community groups and activists who accused policymakers of ignoring the specific racial and educational dynamics impacting their schools (Danns 2014). Many of these activists continued to advocate for school integration but viewed the city school system's approach to integration as inadequate and counterproductive.

This dispute over busing reflected divergent interpretations of the segregation issue. Officials presented the issue as singular, suggesting that any progress toward racial balance was positive, while Black residents understood segregation to be contextual, warranting tailored reforms that address the specific effects of segregation manifesting in each individual school. When Superintendent Redmond released his 1967 report detailing the school system's overall school desegregation reform agenda, CCCO leadership rebuked the plan and its exclusive focus on targeted busing to prevent White flight as "wholly inadequate."[13] The Woodlawn Organization argued that the Redmond plan would leave the vast majority of Black areas of the city untouched and neglect "the task of changing radically the inferior system in the already Black schools."[14] Meanwhile, major citywide civil rights organizations and White-led liberal organizations like the Citizens Schools Committee and the Chicago branch of the American Jewish Congress were far more supportive of Redmond's integration agenda (*Chicago Daily Defender* 1967).[15] The school system's proposals exposed an underlying rift within the movement (*Chicago Tribune* 1967), a rift that was not reducible to a debate over incremental versus complete citywide racial balancing. Black grassroots activists insisted on a different set of criteria for evaluating integration plans that reflected more than the effort to reduce racial separation. They sought to address the forces that made separate schools unequal, but doing so would require official examination of the local manifestations of segregation and educational inequality as they unfolded in a given place and time.

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Even before Redmond published his report on school desegregation, Black Southside community groups were vocal about the disconnect between targeted school integration proposals and the local effects of school segregation. The school system's ongoing preoccupation with stabilizing schools in the South Shore community area provoked backlash even as schools had already become majority Black.[16] As one Parent Teacher Association (PTA) explained to the Chicago Board of Education,

> Ever since the first Negroes moved into South Shore, all discussion has been revolving around one keyword, INTEGRATION. To say the least, the word at this point does sound worn and torn. The fact that as soon as you work with integration you deal with people and their children, not only with figures and tables, seems to have been lost in the anxious strive to 'stabilize, up-grade and finally save our neighborhood.'[17]

Integration reforms focusing on "figures and tables" aimed to reduce White flight from the neighborhood by balancing the ratio of Black and White students in neighborhood schools, but the school PTA called for more than simply shuffling around students to achieve racial balance. For this group, reforming their segregated school required "a concerned eye, that would discover our specific problems."[18] Another South Shore PTA shared this view, arguing that "The problems and pressure that arise in an integrated community require individual attention if stability is to be achieved."[19] From this perspective, official integration proposals did not attend to the various and evolving burdens of segregation.

The educationally problematic aspects of official student busing plans came into relief when the Board of Education held community hearings around its first large-scale student busing plan in 1968. On the Southside, almost all the speakers, including most Black and White proponents of integration, declared their opposition to the proposal. Representatives of majority Black sending schools argued that their children were being sent to academically inferior schools with lesser facilities, and receiving schools complained that they already faced their own impending overcrowding issues, which the plan would only worsen.[20] Black speakers repeatedly complained that their children, who already attended racially mixed schools, were being forced to endure, once again, the "nightmare" of integrating schools in hostile White communities.[21] They argued against busing small numbers of middle-class Black children while ignoring students living in the impoverished ghetto. Rather than aligning with a vision of radical change, the official integration agenda increasingly contradicted Black visions of systemic reform that would distribute educational resources and burdens equally across the city's racially separate and unequal neighborhoods.

Lessons from the Grassroots Critique of School Segregation

Black urban movements that failed to influence the priorities of school integration reform eventually shifted strategies, demanding Black Power and the independent control of their own neighborhood schools (Dougherty 2004; Rickford 2016). In 1968, Black and Latino high school students across Chicago staged walkouts across the city, taking up the mantel of racial educational justice once the demoralizing defeat of the Black school integration movement was apparent (Danns 2003; Rury and Hill, 2015). In Chicago and many other cities, students protested demeaning treatment, racist curricula, and neglectful teachers. Rather than demand integration, students and parents called for racial representation in school leadership and course curricula. Many of the same Southside Chicago neighborhoods that helped lead the city's early 1960s school integration movement staged protests a

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decade later that successfully ousted their neighborhood school principals, installing their preferred Black candidate for the job (Krug 1974).[22] Black and Latino Chicagoans remained critical of major citywide school desegregation reforms enacted in the 1970s and early 1980s (Danns 2014; Todd-Breland 2018). These reforms left the racial hierarchy of the city's schools intact, arguably contributing to the redesign and reproduction of systemic inequality along racial and spatial lines (Banas 1985; Lipman 2004).

This spatial axis of inequality persists in urban education today. In the twenty-first century, the forces of urban residential segregation have in many cases shifted from containment and crowding to disinvestment and displacement, and school policies purportedly designed to promote equity often contribute to this new racial spatial subordination (Buras 2011; Cucchiara 2013; Morel 2018; Pattillo 2010; Pearman and Swain, 2018; Smith and Stovall, 2008). Over the past twenty years, urban school districts have shut down large numbers of schools, especially in Black neighborhoods, arguing that these schools are underperforming, underenrolled, and draining resources that could be invested in more effective schools (Duncan-Shippy 2019). Local Black movements have emerged to challenge school closures by defending the value of their local schools and decrying the consequences of school closures for Black families and neighborhoods (Buras 2011; Ewing 2018; Nuamah 2022). In her study of school closures in Chicago and Philadelphia, Sally Nuamah (2022) shows that Black residents living near schools slated for closure, including residents without school-aged children, recognize these closures as a racist attack on their communities and mobilize race- and place-based movements to defend these schools. Such movements protest both the racially targeted nature of school closures and their detrimental impact on Black neighborhood development. By closing schools in Black urban areas, school policymakers remove established, community-rooted institutions and important local employment opportuntities while undermining neighborhood property values (Bierbaum 2021; Buras 2015; Ewing 2018).

This racial resistance to school closures is, thus, rooted in a struggle over the right to urban space, the right to decent public schools, and the spatial distribution of resources in a racially divided city. On the one hand, these present day grassroots movements parallel grassroots mobilizations against urban school segregation during the early 1960s. They reject efforts to condemn Black community schools and move students to new schools without confronting the local policies and practices that undermined these schools in the first place. On the other hand, resistance against school closures are at odds with the prevailing discourse on school segregation and integration, which suggests that schools serving segregated Black community areas face insurmountable odds and should be replaced with more diverse alternatives. Since the end of the 1960s, resisting "segregation" has been framed as incongruous with the investment in and development of Black neighborhood schools. This conceptual dichotomy, however, was not inevitable. It reflects our narrow interpretation of the segregation issue and the persisting assumption that remedying school segregation requires exposing students of color to White classmates.

In the name of providing parents with school choice and holding schools accountable to high academic standards, the education reforms enacted in cities like Chicago over the last thirty years have further exploited the racial-spatial divide and justified new forms of disinvestment in racially marginalized communities, culminating in waves of school closures (Aggarwal 2024; Drake Rodriguez 2023; Lipman 2013; Rooks 2017). From the perspective of the 1960s Black grassroots critique of school segregation, this new policy regime is segregationist. Like school segregation in the postwar city, it similarly reproduces racial division and dispossession despite operating in a distinct context using different methods. Today's urban Black activists know that defending against this segregationist regime requires defending the value and viability of Black community schools rather than insisting on a blanket preference for diversity. This strategy is not necessarily inconsistent

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with thoughtfully designed school integration initiatives, and some prominent school integration advocates strive to overcome the false choice between community empowerment and desegregation. National non-profit Brown's Promise, for instance, relies on close collaboration with local groups and prioritizes resource redistribution and students' experiences in school alongside student diversity.

If we hope to overcome the legacy and persistance of segregation in American education, we should begin by rejecting the idea that racial segregation is simply a lack of diversity and that promoting diversity in schools is the primary solution. Confronting segregation means holding public schools accountable to meeting the educational needs of working class communities burdened by broader forces of racial and economic injustice. This includes the redistribution of resources to develop tailored educational programs as well as necessary social supports for students and their families. Segregation always entails the disenfranchisement, silencing, and stigmatization of secluded groups, and desegregation, therefore, requires reversing the forces of cultural enclosure that have consistently deprived Black schools of the ability to develop engaging and culturally sustaining intellectual spaces (Sojoyner 2016). Schools serving racially oppressed communities are, thus, not only victims of segregation but also essential assets in the fight to undo segregation. If we hope to achieve equitable integrated institutions and, more fundamentally, to overcome the antidemocratic forces that thrive on racial segregation, then we must commit to supporting race-based schools and institutions rooted in historically oppressed communities of color as part of the patchwork of American culture and progress.

Notes

[1] Letter by Al Raby to Francis Keppel, U.S. Commissioner of Education, July 4, 1965, box 9, TWO Collection, CHM.
[2] Statement by Alma Coggs regarding overcrowding at Burnside School, September 15, 1961, box 101, CUL Records, Special Collections, Daley Library, UIC.
[3] "A statement of Burnside parents of students involved in the sit-in," January 5, 1962, box 101, CUL Records, Special Collections, Daley Library, UIC.
[4] Ibid., page 2.
[5] Letter from Mrs. Alex Welch, President of the Betsy Ross PTA, February 12, 1963, box 248, CUL Records, Special Collections, Daley Library, UIC.
[6] Memo to the Executive Committee of the South Shore Council, February 15, 1963, box 2, SSC Records, CHM.
[7] Report by Herbert Fisher and the CCCO subcommittee on regional or consolidated high school district plans, July 31, 1963, box 102, CUL Records, Special Collections, Daley Library, UIC.
[8] Joint statement on regional high school district presented to the Chicago Board of Education public hearing by the Chatham-Avalon Park Community Council and the Marynook Homeowners Association, October 9, 1961, box 102, CUL Records, Special Collections, Daley Library, UIC.
[9] Memorandum by Robert J. Havighurst regarding Regional High School Plan, 1963, box 52, Robert J. Havighurst Papers, SCRC, The University of Chicago Library.
[10] The Proceedings of the Board of Education of the City of Chicago, Vol. I, July 1, 1965 - Dec. 22, 1965, The Chicago Board of Education Archives.
[11] Statement by the Parents Committee of the Student Woodlawn Area Project to the Chicago Board of Education budget hearing, December 15, 1964, box 76, CUL Records, Special Collections, Daley Library, UIC.
[12] Statement by the Unity Organization for Hyde Park High School to the Chicago Board of Education budget hearing, 1965, box 98, CUL Records, Special Collections, Daley Library, UIC.
[13] CCCO report on "The Redmond Board Report and Its Implications," September 8, 1967, box 9, TWO Collection, CHM.
[14] TWO statement "re: board hearing to consider school issues and problems," October 26, 1967, box 9, TWO Collection, CHM.
[15] Statement by the American Jewish Congress Council of Greater Chicago re: the Redmond Plan, November 24, 1967, box 31, CHA, CHM; Report by the Citizens Schools Committee's Committee to Study the Redmond Report, October 23, 1967, CHA, CHM.

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[16] Statement by the Caldwell and McDowell Schools Parent Teacher Association to the Chicago Board of Education Policy Hearing, April 14, 1967, box 27, CHA, CHM; Statement by the Roseland Area Planning Association to the Chicago Board of Education budget hearing, December 8, 1967, box 32, CHA, CHM.
[17] Statement by the O'Keeffe School Parent Teacher Association to the Chicago Board of Education Policy Hearing, April 14, 1967, box 27, CHA, CHM.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Statement by the Caldwell and McDowell Schools Parent Teacher Association to the Chicago Board of Education Policy Hearing, April 14, 1967, box 27, CHA, CHM.
[20] Transcript of public hearing at South Shore High School on the transferring of students, February 5, 1968, box 35, CHA, CHM; Transcript of public hearing at Bowen High School on the transferring of students, February 8, 1968, box 35, CHA, CHM.
[21] Transcript of public hearing at Bowen High School on the transferring of students, February 8, 1968, box 35, CHA, CHM, page 68.
[22] Report by the Chicago Public Schools Department of Administration on "Racial/Ethnic Survey—Staff," 1974, Chicago Board of Education Archives.

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