Erasing Inequality

BY PAUL E. PETERSON

The New York Sun, September 28, 2005

URL: http://www.nysun.com/article/20702

All forms of school desegregation - either by income, by race, or place of national origin - are positive, so far as I am concerned. The more students of different backgrounds learn together at school, the better - as long as teachers are effective, schools are well managed, the curriculum is sound, and children are motivated to learn. But the mere mixing of students, by itself, is not a panacea for the nation's educational woes.

Unfortunately, that notion, once firmly buried, has recently been revived. Sunday, the New York Times weighed in with a front-page story that uncritically reported claims being made by Raleigh, N.C., school officials that their test score gains were due to their concerted effort to integrate schools by income. "In Wake County, only 40 percent of black students in grades three through eight scored at grade level on state tests a decade ago. Last spring, 80 percent did," the article enthusiastically announced. For outside endorsement, the Times turned to the nation's leading proponent of income integration, Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Fund, who of course endorsed the report as proof that his theory was correct. "Low-income students who have an opportunity to go to middle-class schools are surrounded by peers who have bigger dreams and who are more academically engaged," he chirped. No contrary opinion was solicited.

Intrigued by the story's claim that the percentage of Raleigh's students achieving proficiency had risen dramatically over the past several years, my research assistant, Mark Linnen, took it upon himself to check out the data available on the North Carolina Web site. Over the past 10 years, the percentage proficient or better in grades 3-8 in Raleigh (Wade County) had in fact risen by 13% in math and 12% in reading between 1995 and 2005. That seemed to confirm the bragging of local officials - until it was discovered that, statewide, proficiency rates were up by 21% in math and 19% in reading - gains that outstripped those in Raleigh by over 50%. Nor did the proficiency rates of Raleigh's black and Hispanic students climb any faster than the statewide average for these groups. In fact, the gains were somewhat smaller.

Not that proficiency rates in North Carolina mean much. The state has some of the worst state standards in the country. Last spring, my Education Next co-editor, Rick Hess and I gave North Carolina's proficiency standards one of the worst marks in the country - a D minus. (By comparison, South Carolina got an A.) So low were the standards that 85% of all North Carolina eighth graders was said to be proficient in reading, despite the fact that only 29% of the state's eighth graders was found proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the nation's report card.

One can only suspect that the allegedly astronomical gains in North Carolina - in both Raleigh and elsewhere - were simply a function of a dumbed-down scoring system.
Integration is a good thing. I support it. But drivel put out by school board officials in North Carolina should not be uncritically peddled by the nation's self-proclaimed newspaper of record without so much as checking out the basic facts.

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