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Let us show we believe no child should be left behind

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MICHAEL J. FRONING

In serious conversations about public schooling these days, people eventually mention two landmark federal interventions: The Brown vs. Board of Education decision of 50 years ago and the No Child Left Behind legislation of the current Bush administration.

The Brown decision was the federal government's first real attempt to have our national system of education respond to all children. The notion then that "separate but equal" was inherently unequal and outside the law plays itself out now within the law as we see an achievement gap that demonstrates our continuing separateness by race and class.

Before Brown, our nation legitimized substandard urban and rural schools for children of color by legalizing (through Jim Crow laws) their separation and deliberately under-funding them. Fifty years later, many of these same schools have re-segregated, not by law but because of social attitudes and institutional policies that continue to divide us. The rural and urban schools of the South in 1954 were not integrated. In 2004, many of these same schools are still not integrated. In city after city, in rural counties across the South, and even in many suburbs as well, we find single-race schools. So if we view the metropolitan areas of today the way we viewed them 50 years ago, what has changed? Are we yet addressing the education of all children?

Many of today's African-American grandparents remember the quality of their education in segregated schools with some fondness. They felt the love and dedication of their teachers who were typically the only people in the community who could go to college. However, many photos of that era show the real schools of the segregated South. Those pictures of rough wooden floors and outhouses and crowded conditions demonstrate the lack of caring and the isolation that the word "segregation" brings to mind.

In our modern era, the same lack of caring and the same isolation is shown not in a legal sense, but in the sense that so many rural and urban schools remain segregated and have become desensitized by the poverty of their students and families. These schools are too often poorly maintained, under-funded and without books. Their teachers leave their jobs at staggering rates. Significant numbers of their teachers are underqualified.

Even so, some of these schools, by dint of great leadership and incredible focus, overcome their circumstances, just as throughout our history we have individual examples of success in the face of massive odds. The Web site of the Education Trust has a search engine (<http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/dtm/>) that allows one to find examples of "star" schools throughout the nation. Politicians and social theorists generalize from these examples and develop prescriptions to cure the diseases they see.

The Bush administration, for example, has taken the mantra of the Children's Defense Fund, "Leave No Child Behind," and made a law with the expressed purpose of lifting the

achievement of every student. Its tough-love message to schools is centered on the rewards-and-punishments method. The problem with it is that the sponsors of the legislation forgot the rewards part. They have deliberately created a set of unfunded mandates that leaves high poverty schools behind.

The modern version of a segregated school spends too much of its energy avoiding the punishments. They are forced to be over-focused on test scores and under-focused on the kids. The belief systems that caused us to segregate so long ago have changed in some but not in all. The institutional and personal beliefs that poor children, or black children, or Hispanic children, or whomever, cannot learn or have too many obstacles to their learning, separate us now. These beliefs are their own self-fulfilling prophecies. Because of them, we have legitimized remediation and in fact, it has become the national industry of education.

There are voices among us calling the nation to travel a different path. The best teachers teach whoever comes through the door every morning. They have, in the words of Eric Cooper of the National Urban Alliance, an irrefutable belief in the ability of every child to learn at the highest levels. This is not something from a law, or even a textbook. The belief that every child can learn comes from the heart. It is the belief we pass on to our graduates here at UAB. It is the only belief that can make lemonade out of a social structure that fills the pockets of poor children of color with the lemons of separation.

The belief in the inherent capability to learn is what connects Thurgood Marshall, who led the Brown legal team, to the best learning theories of today. The opinion that Marshall forced Justice Earl Warren to write was about the "savage inequality" of segregation and its effect on the learning environment. Remediation of past deficiencies, however, is not the answer. Instead of remediation, which preserves the achievement gap (some children try to catch up while others are moving ahead), and which is at the heart of all federal education proposals these days, let us try acceleration. Let us put our beliefs into practice and say that if advanced placement courses are good for the suburbs, they must be good for the cities. If inquiry-based learning makes sense in our most up-to-date schools, then let us use it in our most struggling schools. Let's not decide how much a child can learn by how they look, or how much they've had to eat, or where they live.

We have yet, as a nation, to truly integrate our hearts and minds, never mind our schools. So it falls upon all of us to maintain that irrefutable belief in the capacity of our children and to work as hard as we can to provide an environment for learning that allows them to succeed. Let's live the dream of those who fought and died for desegregation by teaching their grandchildren and great grandchildren as if we believed with all our hearts and minds Marian Wright Edelman's charge to "Leave No Child Behind."

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