

Ruby Bridges and The Problem We All Continue to Live With

by Clinton Householder, staff attorney

In his iconic 1964 painting *The Problem We All Live With*, Norman Rockwell depicts a courageous, resolute 6 year-old African-American girl striding toward the steps of the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. The historic civil rights journey of Ruby Bridges was made possible by the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which officially did away with the doctrine of “separate but equal”. In allowing Ruby to set foot in an all-white school without being turned away, *Brown* led the way for the integration of the rest of society.

Ruby’s march, however, didn’t end when she walked through the doors of that school. It was only the first stop on an arduous, unfinished journey. For integration, albeit a necessary and essential first step, neither ended segregation nor the structural racism inherent in our educational system.

Here in northeast Ohio we continue to have some of the most segregated and inequitable school districts in the nation.

What’s gone wrong?

While we celebrate the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, experience shows that integration without equity isn't a solution. Research shows us that even when white and Black students share classrooms, their educational outcomes are wildly inequitable. Further, public schools are designed to serve the children who live around them. So as long as we are segregated by race in our neighborhoods - we

are likely to still be segregated in school buildings.

A history of systemic racism and the economic decline of the region in the 1970s and 1980s have contributed to the problem. A study by the Brookings Institute shows all ten of America's cities "most segregated" between white and Black residents are in the upper right quadrant of the country.

To understand this phenomenon - a short refresher on history you may not have learned in high school:

In the early 1900s, Black Americans came by the millions to the midwest - toward the promise of opportunity in well-paying industrial jobs and away from the South's Jim Crow laws. Many weren't able to escape racist realities and ended up living clustered in low-income urban neighborhoods. These communities then suffered decades of historic disinvestment through lack of economic opportunity and illegal activities such as redlining, a practice of drawing a redline around communities of color and refusing to provide loans and other services to those who live there. As industry left and so did (mostly white) people of means - many of these Black communities were left behind with few resources.

Fast forward to 2022, when as a result of these realities, majority Black and majority white cities and schools are sitting side by side across the Rust Belt region. One study shows nine of the country's "[most segregating borders](#)" are in Ohio - more than exist in any other state. The most shocking examples are often aside the state's larger city centers.

Take one stark example in Mahoning County - once the heart of the booming steel industry - a region on the edge of Appalachia that's lost over 60% of its population over the past 60 years. The suburb city of Poland sits only seven miles outside the county seat, Youngstown. In Youngstown City Schools, 86% of students are non-

white compared with neighboring Poland Local School where 92% of students are white and only 0.7% of students are Black. Correspondingly, 35% of Youngstown residents live at or below the poverty level compared with under 5% of Poland residents.

For students in majority non-white schools like those in Youngstown, resources and services are usually unequal and inequitable. With a powerful high level perspective, Dr. Kenya Walker from Ohio State's Center on Education and Training for Employment found:

- Black students are less likely than white students to have access to college-ready courses.
- Black students have less access to honors or AP classes.
- Predominantly Black schools are staffed with less qualified teachers.
- Non-Black teachers have lower expectations for Black students than Black teachers.
- Black students are two times more likely to be suspended without education services compared to their white peers.
- Schools with 90% or more of students of color spend \$733 less per student.

Exacerbating this, in 1995, Ohio implemented its first school voucher program for students. Tested in the Cleveland Public Schools, students could apply for a voucher to attend private rather than public schools. To date, the voucher program has existed in three iterations. Many advocates for students of color and low-income students believe voucher programs only serve to exacerbate inequities. Families searching for better options than their struggling public school district may opt to send their child to a private school - not knowing these schools are not mandated

and often don't have the resources to meet special needs and accommodate disabilities. Vouchers essentially created a group of learners seeking something better who instead ended up even more [left behind.*](#)

These deeply disturbing inequities lead us to ask - what can be done?

First, we must acknowledge these troubling realities in northeast Ohio. We must acknowledge we live and learn segregated by race and income. That white people often left urban neighborhoods and schools - leaving behind predominantly people of color with fewer resources and less hope for opportunity. That when schools have fewer resources (like those schools with more students of color), the students suffer the consequences, having worse educational outcomes and fewer opportunities.

Second, we must change the narrative that started with "Brown v. Board of Education." The focus must change from integration to equity. Perhaps some schools will educate majority students of color living in poverty. Perhaps these youth face more challenges - need more supports - have more special needs than their peers in surrounding schools. We must ask what these schools need to achieve equity for their students. So every student doesn't get one band-aid put on one knee...but rather as many band-aids as needed in the very places each child needs them.

Finally, we must consider the positive impact on students if we could reroute resources to meet actual need. How might things be different if schools in lower-income neighborhoods could receive budget boosters so they didn't rely on property taxes alone? What if we incentivized our best and brightest new teachers to spend their early years in the districts that need the most support? What if we could wrap critical holistic services around students on-site at school - so they could learn without pain from a toothache, away from the cloud of unmedicated ADHD, or with the support of grief counseling after the loss of a loved one?

Desegregating schools was an important first step. But integration wasn't the answer. Residents of northeast Ohio must challenge themselves to see and challenge the true realities of our public education system to truly achieve equity and opportunity for all children.

** Litigation is happening now in Columbus challenging the constitutionality of the voucher system - asserting it creates a system of education funded by public dollars but shielded from the public eye.*

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

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