

Columbus, Ohio • May 23, 2014 • 66° Partly Cloudy

The Columbus Dispatch

» Hot Links:

60 years after Brown v. Board, charter schools add to segregation

◀ PREVIOUS | NEXT ▶



AP

Linda Brown Smith, right, and her two children pose in their home in 1974 in Topeka, Kan. Smith was a 3rd grader when her father started the class-action suit in 1951 of the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kans., which led to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 landmark ruling in favor of desegregation.



ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH

Columbus students board buses at Buckeye Middle School on Parsons Avenue. Sixty years after the Supreme Court outlawed "separate but equal" schools, many students in public and charter schools in Columbus attend classrooms of mostly one race.

By **Bill Bush**

The Columbus Dispatch • Saturday May 17, 2014 9:55 AM

Comments: 1

42

117

Sixty years ago today, the U.S. Supreme Court said that education "is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms," setting the Columbus City Schools on a collision course with desegregation. Over the six decades since the landmark ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, Columbus has seen students go from being steered into segregated schools, to being bused to racially balanced schools, to being back in neighborhood schools that are as racially isolated as the areas they serve.

Today, a form of school never envisioned at the time of the Brown ruling is serving more than 14,000 Columbus students who choose to ride buses to some of the most segregated schools in the city: charter schools. Almost 7 in 10 of these charter students are black.

More charter students than Columbus City Schools students now attend schools with black enrollments of 90 percent or higher. During the desegregation lawsuit, such schools were described in court proceedings as "one-race black schools."

Nearly 3,800 students attend 17 such charter schools, or about 27 percent of the local charter population. That's more than the almost 3,000 Columbus City Schools students who attend seven one-race black schools, about 6 percent of the district's enrollment.

The same dynamic is playing out in charter schools across the nation, said Iris C. Rotberg, a professor of education policy at George Washington University.

While charters generally have not shown academic gains over district schools, they "are more likely to increase segregation," Rotberg said. "The charters are just another component that can in many areas make it worse than it already is."

EDUCATION BLOG

» Groups says OSU restricts freedom of speech

EDUCATION DATABASES

- » District report cards
- » School report cards

» School District Poverty Estimates

HELPFUL LINKS

- » Bexley
- » Canal Winchester
- » Columbus
- » Dublin
- » Gahanna-Jefferson
- » Grandview Heights
- » Groveport-Madison
- » Hamilton
- » Hilliard
- » New Albany-Plain
- » Reynoldsburg
- » South-Western
- » Upper Arlington
- » Westerville
- » Whitehall
- » Worthington

LOCAL STORIES FROM THISWEEK

- » Powell condos move forward despite anxious residents
- » City leaders trying to keep facilities open
- » Zoo happy to see star attractions return
- » Township board OKs conditional-use permit and five variances
- » Norwich trustees: Fire contract will be terminated if Brown Township cannot pass levy
- » Hunt hired as Canal Winchester's assistant superintendent
- » Mumps reported at Worthington Kilbourne High School
- » Residents start recall process on Sagar

MORE ARTICLES

ThisWeek
COMMUNITY NEWS

She wrote in a March column in *Education Week*: "It is important that government does not exacerbate the problem of segregation by ignoring the unintended consequences of its policies. The risk is an increasingly divided public education system."

Separate and unequal

In its 1954 ruling in *Brown*, the Supreme Court said that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," finding evidence in the shabby school buildings provided to black students in the supposedly "separate but equal" systems in the South.

Today, most charter operators would be happy to get any aging school building discarded by a district, said Chad Aldis, vice president for Ohio policy and advocacy with the pro-charter Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

"Sixty years after *Brown v. Board*, charters serve a larger percentage of minority students and are underfunded and have inferior buildings," Aldis said. "It's kind of the bitter irony."

An Ohio Supreme Court order to boost state education funding led to a wave of school construction statewide, but charters didn't qualify for the money. Many charters remain housed in unconventional buildings, including strip malls, warehouses, industrial parks, church basements and even a former go-cart track.

In Ohio, charters rely solely on state financial aid, except in Cleveland, where they get some local property-tax dollars under a special state law.

Charters spend about half the per-student government funds that district schools do, according to the report issued by Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman's Education Commission. That panel recommended sharing Columbus City Schools' local property taxes with high-performing, nonprofit charters, but voters overwhelmingly defeated the levy in November.

"Funding inequity between district schools and charter schools has implications for buildings, teacher pay and transportation of students," the Columbus Education Commission wrote.

But charter schools aren't thwarting the mandate of the *Brown* decision, Aldis said, because attendance is voluntary. The system is designed to give free options to students who are trying to find something better than their troubled district schools.

"It's much less of a problem when it's something that's done by choice, and not done by zoning, by rules, by government edict," Aldis said.

Brown in Columbus

The two-story Monroe Elementary School in Topeka, Kan., sits by some abandoned railroad tracks and aging industrial buildings, in a quiet neighborhood not far from the state Capitol dome. In the 1950s, it was one of four officially segregated elementary schools in Topeka. The middle and high schools were integrated.

Oliver Brown, whose daughter Linda attended Monroe, became the lead plaintiff in the case that would dismantle official school segregation, and rock Columbus decades later.

Up until the year of the *Brown* decision, the Columbus City Schools district had reported to the state that it operated five "separate schools for colored children" — a junior high and four elementary schools. After the *Brown* decision, the state suddenly stopped keeping that statistic, which it had tracked for decades.

In 1977, U.S. District Judge Robert M. Duncan found that school officials separated the races using several methods, including gerrymandering school attendance boundaries, creating special "optional attendance zones" that allowed white families to escape nearby black schools, assigning black teachers primarily to schools with large black enrollments, and building new schools at locations that could be easily gerrymandered to segregate.

Combined with private housing segregation that wasn't completely outlawed until 1968, when the federal Fair Housing Act prohibited it, the Columbus district's methods meant that just over 70 percent of students attended a school that was at least 80 percent single-race.

The result in 1979 was a massive and divisive busing program, funded by the city and state. The state was ordered to help fund the desegregation of Columbus schools because Duncan found that it had turned a blind eye to the illegal practices. The district appealed, but the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Duncan's order, finding Columbus operated a "dual school system."

A fleet of 213 new buses began to ferry children to new racially balanced schools, under the Supreme Court mandate to remove deliberate segregation "root and branch." About 35,000 students were transported to a different school. Minority enrollment at 46 of the district's 146 schools buildings dropped by at least 30 percentage points. Duncan released the district from his order in 1985, with a warning not to repeat past mistakes.

Today, the district, following a state requirement to provide charter transportation, uses more buses to transport charter students — 256 — than were used to desegregate the entire district. Buses that serve charter students represent more than a third of the district's 734 buses, said district spokesman Jeff Warner.

Not intentional

The racial makeup of charters is largely a result of the rules set by the state legislature on where charters can open, said Mark Real of KidsOhio. Initially, charters could locate only in the state's large urban districts, which are also heavily minority. Whites make up only 27 percent of Columbus City Schools' enrollment.

Later, lawmakers expanded where charters could operate to include other districts that were getting poor academic results on proficiency tests. But the rules mean that charters can't physically locate in affluent school districts, because of their typically good test scores.

"In some urban areas, the schools are already so segregated that it's hard to see a difference" between the racial makeups of district and charter schools, Rotberg said.

Initially, some people — including now-deceased Columbus Board of Education member Bill Moss — predicted that charters would be used by white students to leave black district schools. But the opposite has largely occurred: Black students generally left their black schools. Whites make up only about 20 percent of brick-and-mortar charter enrollment in Columbus. Hispanic students make up 8 percent, multiracial

4 percent and Asian about 1 percent.

In online charter schools, where whites predominate, it's impossible to determine whether students are from Columbus because they draw students statewide.

bbush@dispatch.com

Favorite Print Story 14

WEEKLY ADS



RITE AID
Don't Miss Our
Outdoor Savings
2 Days Left



SPORTS AUTHORITY
Great Deals To Get
Your Heart Racing!
Expires Tomorrow



GIANT EAGLE
Incredible Savings
To Celebrate
Memorial Day!
This Week Only

COMMENTS

Login or register to post a comment.

JOHN CONDO (HILTCONDO1)

charter schools are for greedy people to make easy money

flag

2014-05-17 08:33:07.0